Chapter 301 - 301 Devil

301 Devil

Criminal pathway… Lumian began to recall the contents of Aurore's grimoires.

Sequence 9 Criminal possessed a formidable physique, sharp senses, and a range of criminal skills. They were adept at wielding various weapons and could even kill their targets using something as mundane as a spoon.

Sequence 8 Coldblooded were heartless and inhuman. Their bodies were further strengthened, and they gained mastery over spell-like abilities with a leaning towards the eviler domains. Different Coldblooded excelled in different aspects, making them challenging opponents to deal with with no one-size-fits-all solution.

Sequence 7 Serial Killer was well-versed in devilish knowledge and rituals. They could summon projections of devils from the Abyss and had a sick fascination with creating serial murders.

Turning to Madam Magician with a thoughtful expression, Lumian inquired, "What are the names of Sequence 6 and Sequence 5 on the Criminal pathway?"

"Sequence 6 is called Devil, and Sequence 5 is Desire Apostle," Madam Magician readily shared her knowledge.

From worshiping the devil to becoming one—a fitting name for the Devil pathway. And Desire Apostle sounds like a Beyonder who would follow the Mother Tree of Desire. It's a compatible match. They might as well rename it to Mother Tree of Desire Apostle… Lumian couldn't help but criticize as he analyzed the information.

Madam Magician continued, "The first major qualitative transformation of the Criminal pathway is at Sequence 6 Devil. After the corresponding Beyonder temporarily transforms into a devil, not only will their strength, speed, and defense improve, but they become immune to most poisons and acquire a certain resistance to curses and flames.

"More importantly, they possess Malicious Perception. If someone can cause fatal damage to them in a short period of time and begin to take steps to make it a reality, and both parties are within the range of their abilities, the Devil Beyonder can sense the source of danger and the perpetrator. This allows them to take targeted revenge in a counterstrike."

So powerful… Lumian couldn't help but frown.

If the Rose School of Thought's subsequent operations had members of the Devil families involved, the situation would become exponentially more dangerous.

Of course, the Prisoner pathway's Zombie and Wraiths were also terrifying.

Most importantly, at a certain Sequence, Beyonders of these two pathways boasted formidable defenses against flames.

Dammit, Pyromaniacs would be in for a rough time! Lumian made a self-deprecating comment, infected by Franca's and Jenna's vulgarities.

After pondering for a moment, Lumian inquired, "How short can the period of time be for the Malicious Perception to be effective?"

Madam Magician smiled and replied, "The Devil pathway is highly individualistic. Devils from various races each possess their distinct abilities. Even among devils originating from the same race, differences arise due to their individual nature. The reason behind this lies in the requirement of ostentatious malice, which varies from person to creature.

"Unique wills, distinct hearts, and a penchant for desires all amalgamate to form the diverse nature of devils.

"Now, to your query. Some Devils can sense malice merely minutes before its occurrence, whereas others can foretell it hours or even more in advance. As they progress in Sequence, this ability only grows stronger.

"The range of this ability's influence can span a few kilometers, an entire market district, or perhaps even encompass the whole of Trier.

"Furthermore, Devils wield an array of spells involving flames, poison, and filth."

The more Lumian listened, the more serious he grew. Devils were truly powerful —just like Zombies countering Pyromaniacs, who were experts in fire spells and close combat.

After briefly explaining the Desire Apostle's abilities, Madam Magician comforted him with a smile,

"Don't worry too much. Even if the Rose School of Thought takes action in the future, their target will most likely be Gardner Martin. You'll just be along for the ride. The Iron and Blood Cross Order, being a secret organization, has enough strength to resist the Rose School of Thought even if the Devil families send someone to participate.

"If the Bliss Society and the Rose School of Thought share intelligence, you may become their primary target, but they won't launch a fatal attack on you paradoxically. They fear releasing an Inevitability angel like Termiboros. As long as you pay more attention to abnormalities and suspected conspiracies around you, you'll have enough time and opportunity to seek help."

Upon hearing this, Lumian retorted, “If the Rose School of Thought sends an angel to capture me, how will I have time to seek help?”

Madam Magician chuckled.

“Do you think Trier is a public washroom where an angel can descend and snatch someone away easily?

“If it weren’t for the alternate space of the Tree of Shadow with the Paramita World enveloping it, that brainless Abomination wouldn’t have been able to descend its power.

“So, remember to avoid such places and live under the sun in Trier.”

Lumian heaved a sigh of relief and asked in confusion, “Abomination?”

Could it be the power summoned by Susanna Mattise?

Madam Magician’s expression turned odd.

“Yes, Abomination—the child of the Chained God whom the Mother Tree of Desire worshipers and the Rose School of Thought originally worshiped. He’s a Sequence 1 angel and the current leader of the Rose School of Thought.

“I won’t tell you His real name. This guy is covered in curses. If you say His real name often, you might become a frog that needs a prince’s kiss to recover. Or worse.”

“Why a prince?” Lumian had read the Intis Fairy Tales Collection published two years ago and remembered that the protagonist of the story was a princess.

“Why else would it be called a curse?” Madam Magician wore a matter-of-fact expression.

Lumian was speechless. He asked, “The spawn of the Mother Tree of Desire are angels, already roaming our world. And to descend, the child of the Great Mother requires a ritual. Is one more special than the other?”

“They’re equally special,” said Madam Magician, her expression taking an odd turn once more. “The crux of the matter is that it wasn’t the Mother Tree of Desire who gave birth to the Abomination, but a high-ranking existence in our world known as the Chained God.”

Lumian’s heart filled with trauma as he immediately thought of Louis Lund, Administrator Béost, and his valets.

“Can the Mother Tree of Desire impregnate creatures of all races and genders through the barrier?” Lumian asked with a hint of fear in his voice.

Madam Magician shook her head.

“She doesn’t have authority in that regard. That belongs to the Great Mother.

“However, if you’re enticed by Her and end up interacting with the power She has descended or the aura that seeped into our world, She has plenty of ways to impregnate you. Furthermore, the Chained God pathway—the Prisoner pathway—is rather special and has a close connection to the Mother Tree of Desire.

“If it weren’t for Mr. Fool’s protection, the temperance faction members would have more or less been influenced by Her in the past year or two.”

Lumian nodded, then brought up the issue of the indulgence faction and the temperance faction.

“I believe the temperance faction’s philosophy is correct, but why can the indulgence faction still grow and possess such strength? Is it because there’s no fear of losing control when they are already crazy?”

Madam Magician chuckled and responded, “The temperance faction’s philosophy is correct, but it doesn’t mean that the indulgence faction’s viewpoint is necessarily erroneous.

“You have to remember that acting based on the potion’s name is like tarot cards. There’s a difference between the upright and reversed position. And even if we act in the upright manner, the acting principles summarized by different people will vary according to their unique minds and experiences. After all, we’re just acting. Our goal is to deceive the mental imprint left behind by that entity and digest the potion bit by bit. It would be troublesome if we were to completely align with Him.”

Lumian nodded in understanding.

“So, the phrase ‘remember that you’re only acting’ not only prevents us from losing ourselves to avoid mental problems but also helps avoid such problems altogether?”

“That’s right,” Madam Magician affirmed.

Lumian then steered the conversation back to matters pertaining to the Mother Tree of Desire.

“Mr. Poet mentioned that there are multiple organizations that worship the Mother Tree of Desire?”

“Poet…” Madam Magician’s lips curled up slightly. “They’re all relatively small organizations that haven’t formed a large cult. They’re far inferior to the Rose School of Thought and the few Devil families, but they’re relatively hidden. Currently, we are aware of three. One is the Bliss Society, the other is the Naturism Sect, and the third is the Tree Worship Sect.”

After pondering the matter for a while, Lumian finally brought up the idea of crafting a mystical item using the Shadow Branch.

“Madam, once I receive the reward from Mr. K, I’d like your help in finding a saint-level Artisan to craft the item. Do you happen to know the price?” Lumian inquired.

Madam Magician grinned and replied, “I haven’t rewarded you yet for successfully joining the Iron and Blood Cross Order. How about using that reward to cover the cost?”

“That sounds perfect,” Lumian happily agreed.

Receiving three rewards for a mission was truly a remarkable thing.

Madam Magician nodded thoughtfully and said, “A friend’s relative knows a demigod-level Artisan. I’ll check with them first. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll find another option.”

She then smiled and asked, “With the gap between the Lucky One and the potential reward from Mr. K, are you sure you want to use one of them to create a mystical item?”

Lumian responded with certainty, “I won’t have any regrets.”

His approach had always been to utilize available resources as swiftly as possible.

It had to be known that the padre was already a Sequence 5 bestowed when he left Cordu. He might have even taken a potion to boost his abilities. Dealing with him on one’s own was akin to embracing death for Lumian.

He needed to make use of every available resource to enhance his skills quickly and gather more allies to increase his chances of success!

During his early days as a wanderer, Lumian once stumbled upon a wild apple tree laden with fruit. He intended to wait for the apples to grow larger and less sour before figuring out how to pluck them. However, to his surprise a few days layer, someone else had managed to harvest all the small and sour apples.

This incident left a profound mark on Lumian, significantly influencing his approach to handling things.

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Chapter 302 - 302 Mummy Ashes

302 Mummy Ashes

Madam Magician didn't say more and asked again, "Do you want to return to Salle de Bal Brise now, or stay here until noon?"

Lumian had never left Intis, let alone come to the Southern Continent. Since he had nothing planned, he nodded and replied, "I'd like to explore around a bit."

Madam Magician gave a slight nod and vanished before him.

Almost instantly, a bone-chilling wind swept through the crowd and struck Lumian.

Having come from Trier in the summer, he couldn't help but shiver in the harsh highlander winter.

Accompanied by the cold breeze, the distant clamor of the market, a few hundred meters away, filled Lumian's ears, making him feel truly immersed in this world.

Recalling how Madam Magician's arrival and disappearance had gone unnoticed by the surrounding people, Lumian quickly made a guess.

Did she create a wall of spirituality or pull me into a separate alternate space?

As these thoughts raced through Lumian's mind, he noticed that the passersby looked at him with wariness and puzzlement. He was only wearing a thin shirt, a black vest, and thin pants, which were hardly suitable for the harsh winter.

"What are you staring at? Haven't you seen someone acting cool?" Lumian muttered. Relying on Alms Monk's endurance, he nonchalantly ventured into the market.

The smell of fresh livestock dung, the sweet aroma of corn, and the tantalizing scent of roasted meat with spices filled his nostrils.

Lumian surveyed the area and spotted numerous stalls selling various food items made primarily from corn. There were boiled whole corn, roasted corn with red sauce, corn chunks served in thick soup, roasted corn wrapped in beef and mutton, onions, and potatoes, corn ground into a gooey paste and stuffed into various meat chunks, and corn spread into rough flatbread sprinkled with ingredients…

After a moment of consideration, Lumian made his way through the "cleared" path among the marketers and arrived at a stall.

The stall owner was a man in his thirties with dark and flushed skin, gaunt face, high cheekbones, and dark brown eyes. He had long greasy black hair and wore a black felt hat along with a dark red robe made of wool and other materials.

Lumian pointed at the bubbling yellow corn paste in the iron-colored pot and asked in Intisian, “How much?”

He had noticed that some folks here understood Intisian. The transactions were done using various metal currencies, including verl d’or.

The stall owner seemed scared, and he replied in non-fluent Intisian with a hint of flattery, “5 coppet for 1 cup.”

A lick, pretty cheap… Lumian glanced at the corn paste with mutton chunks and pulled out a brass coin with a Hornacis mountain range pattern on the front.

The vendor breathed with relief and quickly produced a paper cup that didn’t quite match the market’s style and technology. He filled it up generously, even adding a few extra meat chunks.

As Lumian received the cup, warmth spread through his body.

It was a wonderful experience to have something warm while enduring the biting wind.

The even better experience was the warm corn paste flowing from his mouth into his esophagus and into his stomach, spreading warmth to every nook and cranny of his body.

The corn paste, with its light sweetness and a hint of spiciness and pungency, perfectly complemented the beef and mutton cubes, neutralizing their gamey smell. It was peculiar and appetizing, a treat for his taste buds.

Ignoring the cautious glances from the women and the fear and loathing from the man driving the cows and sheep, Lumian sipped his corn paste and made his way to the end of the market.

Soon, he entered the City of White, Rapus. He spotted the golden Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral and the God of Steam and Machinery cathedral adorned with various industrial components. The white buildings, shops selling leather and fabrics, the Highland Import and Export Corporation, and the Rapus Mining Federation signs were all visible. Carriages pulled by long-haired cows and medium-sized horses filled the streets, accompanied by locals in robes and a few foreigners in formal attire.

Lumian picked a shop called Highland Mystic Potion and entered like a tourist.

The owner, an Intisian in his forties, with typical black hair and blue eyes, wore a white shirt with floral patterns, thick cashmere clothes, and a dark blue coat with golden trim.

Upon seeing Lumian, he greeted him warmly, “Good morning, dear compatriot.”

The man checked out Lumian’s attire and asked with concern, “Did you encounter a bandit?”

“I just arrived in Rapus. There was an accident on the way,” Lumian replied, smiling with a Trier accent.

The proprietor of the mystic potion nodded in understanding.

“The Southern Continent isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, but it’s a paradise for adventurers. I arrived in West Balam fifteen years ago in search of opportunities. Life only turned for the better when I found true opportunities in the City of White. By steam!”

With a sigh, he drew a triangular Sacred Emblem on his chest.

“By steam!” Lumian responded with the same etiquette.

The owner’s smile grew warmer.

“Brother, would you like some mummy powder? Real mummy powder!”

Lumian looked around the small shop and smiled.

“Why don’t you display the mummy in the window to prove its authenticity?”

The boss smiled sheepishly and said, “That would upset the barbarians.

“Some buy mummy powder, but most can’t accept mummies as commodities.”

Lumian deliberately said, “When I left Trier, there was a shortage of mummy powder. The price skyrocketed. Ever thought of transporting mummies back to Trier for sale?”

“Maritime trade is too risky, and the import-export companies give terrible prices, not to mention the taxes they charge. Those damned hyenas!” The owner glanced at Lumian, testing the waters, “If you’re willing to take the risks, we can cooperate.”

“How many mummies can you provide?” Lumian feigned skepticism.

The boss smiled.

“That depends on how many you want. I have the right connections.”

I can have as many as I want? Have you unearthed the grave of a nobleman from the Highlands Kingdom? Or will you find a corpse or even a living person to make one on the spot? Lumian engaged in a conversation with the owner of the Highland Mystic Potion and left the shop, pretending he needed time to consider

the offer.

After wandering for some time, Lumian came across a magnificent three-story white building by the roadside, bustling with locals swarming in.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he followed the crowd inside, only to find Intis soldiers, clad in their distinctive black triangular hats and blue coats with gold threads, guarding the entrance in their white pants and black leather boots.

Rapus, Lumian thought to himself, is truly an Intis colonial city. His gaze settled on the golden words above the main entrance, which read: “Rapus Specialized Court.”

Taking a seat in an empty corner of the courtroom, Lumian tuned in to the trial that was underway.

Two Intis soldiers stood accused of a heinous crime—intercepting a newlywed couple in the suburbs, murdering the husband, and subjecting the wife to unspeakable horrors.

The latter was fortunate enough to survive. With numerous witnesses and ample evidence, the entire case appeared quite clear-cut.

After much deliberation, the judge, who was now holding the third hearing, finally pronounced them guilty, decreeing their immediate expulsion from the highlands. Upon their return to Intis, they would face further punishment in a military court.

The verdict didn’t sit well with the local crowd, and they expressed their dissatisfaction loudly. However, the judge remained resolute, ordering bailiffs and soldiers to remove the dissenters from the court.

Lumian observed the faces of the agitated and angered locals as they were forced to leave, and only when they had gone did he decide to leave the courtroom as well.

As he strolled past the Eternal Blazing Sun cathedral’s square, he noticed a group of clergymen in white robes adorned with golden threads.

They were walking towards the cathedral, keeping a safe distance from the crowd, and speaking in hushed tones.

Lumian, relying on his Hunter’s ears, strained to catch their words from afar.

Though the distance made it difficult, he managed to make out two phrases: “Evernight’s power… has invaded this place…”

What could that mean? Is the Evernight Goddess Church of the Loen Kingdom extending its reach into the Star Highlands? Lumian pondered for a moment before continuing on his way.

…

At 12:30 p.m. Trier time, Madam Magician escorted Lumian back to Salle de Bal Brise, and he reappeared in his bedroom.

He sat down at his wooden table and began organizing Mr. Poet's interpretation of the dream's symbolic elements.

In the midst of his work, Lumian heard familiar footsteps approaching and an impolite knock on the door.

Putting down the fountain pen, Lumian stood up and glanced at the entrance.

"Come in."

It was Franca, dressed in her usual attire of blouse, beige breeches, and red boots. However, she now wore a light-colored pleated dress around her waist.

"Very strange," Lumian remarked honestly.

Franca sighed, a mix of joy and melancholy on her face.

"I'm not used to wearing dresses yet. This will have to do for now.

"This is to welcome Pleasure."

"Pleasure?" Lumian was puzzled by the term she mentioned.

Franca closed the door behind her and explained with a complex expression,

"Since you've joined the Iron and Blood Cross Order, my initial mission is considered accomplished. Now, I'll see if I can join and assist with your operation.

"And since the mission is complete, there should be a reward. The next Sequence for a Witch is Demoness of Pleasure.

"Yes, I already have all the main ingredients and most of the supplementary ones, except for real mummy ashes. I came to ask if you could keep an eye out during your mysticism gatherings. Damn it, those mummy ashes sold in shops are all fake!"

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Chapter 303 - 303 Sparks of “Fire”

303 Sparks of “Fire”

Mummy ashes… Lumian’s mind immediately went to the Highland Mystic Potion shop in Rapus.

The mummies had their origins in the old Highlands Kingdom, and they had a special ancient Highlander term for it. Emperor Roselle translated it into “mummy.”

In simpler terms, the most genuine and ancient mummies could be found in Star Highlands, the largest source of mummy ashes.

Franca grew more and more agitated as she spoke.

“Why do you think men in Trier are so keen on things that enhance their abilities in that area? They even dare to consume mummy ashes! This means that those who genuinely need them can’t afford the real deal!”

“Many women in Trier are interested as well, hoping their husbands and lovers can perform better in bed.” Lumian had read about it and asked Franca curiously, “Does it really work?”

Franca scoffed.

“I can’t see any other effects besides getting sick from using powder made from a specially prepared corpse. Well, its use in mysticism is a different matter.

“Think about it. Trier is now flooded with fake mummy ashes. People are gobbling them up without knowing if they’re authentic!

“There are many herbs with similar effects, but once they are labeled as mummy ashes, the price skyrockets. Who wouldn’t take advantage of that?

“Don’t overestimate the merchants’ conscience. I’ve heard complaints at many mysticism gatherings about people finding dead rats, grinding them into powder, mixing it with herbs, and selling it as mummy ashes.

“When I, um, before I had superpowers and was still struggling, I saw the café owner making fake coffee from chicory. Later, he couldn’t even afford that. He gathered coffee dregs, animal bile, and even brick dust and soot as a substitute. Believe me, if you visit the kitchens of certain restaurants and cafés, you’d want to hang the boss from the gallows. Those escargot shells are reused, picked up from the trash, filled with ingredients, and served to new customers”

Franca continued her rant, expressing her frustration with counterfeit and inferior products hindering her Beyonder career.

After she finished speaking, Lumian asked with certainty, “Have you finished digesting your Witch potion?”

Franca’s emotions returned to normal as she replied smugly, “That was a long time ago. Have you seen me act as a Witch during this period of time?”

Lumian changed the subject thoughtfully.

“You seem to despise the Rose School of Thought for their acts of terror in the Northern Continent. You even mock them for hindering the colonization resistance by the Southern Continent natives. I don’t quite understand your logic. Shouldn’t they resist and take revenge when bullied?”

Franca walked to the window of Lumian’s bedroom and gazed at the dock and depot concealed by buildings. Her gaze was unfocused as she said, “They should —if they wish to seek the adrenaline from exacting vengeance, for a moment of exhilaration. But if you want to lead the Southern Continent to expel the colonists, such actions will only have the opposite effect. A philosopher back home once said that no king should send troops out in anger. Resisting colonization is a serious and challenging matter; it’s something that shouldn’t become a wastebasket for venting one’s emotions.”

Seeing Lumian’s confusion, Franca pointed out the window.

“There are many workers and laborers there. They work hard every day and sleep in bedbug-infested rooms. Are they colonists? Did they benefit from the colonies? True, their jobs may be a result of colonial trade, but will they lose their jobs without the colonies and normal trade? I don’t think so. The most likely possibility is that they will still have a job that barely provides sustenance; it’s the bosses who lose excessive profits.

“They have their own demands and a desire to change the current society. They often join Trier’s citizens in various marches and protests, expressing deep dissatisfaction with the government.

“There are many similar people in Trier. Some of them have various reasons and even sympathize with the Southern Continent colonies.

“A philosopher king back home once said that we must distinguish between our friends and foes when carrying out deeds. The Rose School of Thought’s various terrorist acts will only pit those who sympathize with the colonists and those who are also resisting the government against them. It makes them the object of hatred that will be exploited by the rulers to bridge any internal conflicts. It will harm the people of the Southern Continent’s resistance against colonization.

“The philosopher king even prohibited his intelligence officers from carrying out assassinations or seeking revenge, let alone causing terrorist incidents.”

Franca snapped out of her daze and spoke with enthusiasm, her eyes sparkling, "As long as we can gather more allies, isolate our enemies, and ignite that tiny spark, it can set a whole wilderness ablaze!"

Who is friend and foe… Finding allies and isolating the enemy… Even a tiny spark can set a whole wilderness ablaze… The words left a profound impact on Lumian. He pondered Franca's words repeatedly, especially her last sentence. It unveiled a new understanding of Pyromaniac, bringing him closer to unveiling his first acting principle.

After a few moments, Lumian nodded solemnly.

"I agree with you now. The Rose School of Thought's acts of terror are extremely foolish, mere decisions made after their minds are filled with desire. Uh, as believers of the Mother Tree of Desire, it's quite expected."

Franca pursed her lips.

"If the Rose School of Thought focused on assassinating colonial generals, members of parliament, and high-ranking government officials, as well as destroying battleships and arsenals, I wouldn't mock them. But their blood sacrifices, indiscriminately killing people, are the actions of lunatics. I don't want to become a sacrifice to these madmen one day."

Lumian remarked, "It's a classic case of turning sympathizers against each other."

Franca disdainfully added, "Not only do these lunatics carry out blood sacrifices in the Northern Continent, but they also do it in the Southern Continent, turning villages into uninhabited lands. The Southern Continent has the Rose School of Thought as another insurmountable obstacle besides the colonists."

Lumian nodded gently and said, "That lady took me to the Star Highlands and during my tour of Star Highlands, I encountered a mummy merchant. Should I request permission to visit again and obtain some real mummy ashes for you?"

That lady… Franca realized something and decided not to press further. After some thought, she said, "No need for that now. Just because Trier has plenty of counterfeit goods doesn't mean there's nothing authentic. Let's try to find the authentic ones first. If not, we'll go to the Southern Continent."

Lumian honestly shared his intentions, "I hope you can advance to Sequence 6 within a week and become a Demoness of Pleasure."

"Huh?" Franca was confused.

Who's the one making the advancement?

Lumian didn't hide anything, responding directly, "It has been prophesied that Guillaume Bénet will appear in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge next week. I want to find him and capture him, and I need the help of more friends. The Boss has

already agreed to help me find him. The stronger you are, the higher our chances of capturing Guillaume Bénet."

Amused, Franca teased, "You're learning on the spot, kid. You really aren't holding back anymore. You made a request without getting my agreement to help."

Lumian smiled, replying, "Isn't that what I'm doing now?"

Franca pondered for a moment before saying, "Wait a few more days. If we still can't find real mummy's ashes, we'll go to the Southern Continent to search for them. Remember, try not to trouble the Major Arcana card holder if possible."

"Right then," Lumian said, sharing a similar view, but he never missed a chance to fleece. Otherwise, it would be best to seek Madam Magician's help in dealing with Guillaume Bénet.

A subordinate who couldn't handle problems on their own, bothering their superior all the time, would eventually be left behind!

Furthermore, the Tarot Club followed a rule of equivalent exchange. What price would one have to pay to enlist the help of a demigod-level Major Arcana card holder?

After chatting for a while, Franca, who was about to leave, glanced at the window and suddenly said, "Although Gardner Martin already knows the situation and has made preparations, you can't be careless. You can't place all your hopes on him. The Rose School of Thought is an ancient secret organization. It must possess various abilities."

Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden? Lumian was taken aback for a moment before responding with tacit understanding, "The Boss is at least a Conspirer. He has probably set countless traps in secret, awaiting the arrival of the Rose School of Thought."

On this topic, the two of them continued their conversation as they left the bedroom and entered the corridor.

Franca lowered her voice and said, "I sensed something amiss with the glass in your window. I suspect a Wraith."

The Rose School of Thought's Wraith? Franca discovered something wrong with her Witch's grasp of mirrors? Lumian's nerves tensed as he nodded slightly, acting as though they were discussing an ordinary topic.

He saw Franca stroll into the café and depart Salle de Bal Brise before stepping out of the corridor. Like always, he settled into his regular seat and savored his aromatic coffee.

An hour went by, and Lumian started to feel a bit more at ease. He thought the Wraith had probably left, so he shifted his focus to Gardner Martin and the

potential traps.

The following days were filled with paranoia for Lumian. He sensed eyes on him from the glass window in his room and the bathroom mirror, but nothing alarming occurred.

Finally, the day of the reward promised by Mr. K arrived.

As Lumian descended the stairs of Auberge du Coq Doré, he encountered an unfamiliar woman.

Dressed in a lake-blue dress, her brown hair flowed naturally, and her brown eyes had a uniquely ethereal quality. Her looks were above average, her cheeks plump, and her demeanor stood out from the ordinary.

As Lumian passed by the front desk, he casually asked Madame Fels, “Is that young lady a new tenant?”

The plump Madame Fels smiled ingratiatingly. “No, she’s Miss Safari, staying in Room 309. She went to a small seaside town to be a human model for a painter. She only returned today.

“How enviable. Her job lets her take a vacation by the sea.”

That human model? Lumian nodded and left Auberge du Coq Doré, catching a public carriage to Avenue du Boulevard.

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Chapter 304 - 304 Decency

304 Decency

Avenue du Boulevard, 19 Rue Scheer, basement.

Mr. K's face remained hidden under the massive hood, but Lumian could feel the admiration and recognition in his gaze.

Standing behind a red armchair, Mr. K pointed to a narrow wooden table by the wall.

"Make a choice. These are Grade 2 Sealed Artifacts, as per the standards of various Churches. They have distinct characteristics but come with dangerous negative effects. Nonetheless, there are ways to resolve those issues and utilize them to some extent."

Following the gesture of Mr. K's raised right hand, Lumian spotted three containers on the narrow wooden table.

One was an exquisite wooden box adorned with rubies, emeralds, agates, and other precious items. Another was a rubber injector, and the last one was a wide-mouthed bottle filled with a dreamy green liquid with a golden object at the bottom.

Mr. K approached the table, picked up the wooden box with gems, and opened it.

Inside, there lay a thin and soft leather mask. As Mr. K lifted it to display, an exaggerated face outlined in red, yellow, and white oil paint emerged.

For some reason, Lumian's mood took a plunge at the sight of the face, and his heart filled with sorrow.

"It's called the Clown Mask," Mr. K introduced in a low, raspy voice. "Wearing it enables you to create Paper Figurine Substitutes. You can ignite combustible objects within a 50-meter radius and leap between flames, allowing you to transfer wounds across your body and turn a fatal injury into a minor one. However, each wound can only be transferred once.

"It will also meld with your face, altering your appearance. This aspect is beyond your control, but it grants you strong expression control and sharp premonition for a short duration.

"To store it safely, you'll need a high-value container. Otherwise, it will continuously bring frustration, pain, and sorrow to those around it, gradually

driving them insane until they break down. For Beyonders, this often means losing control.

“That’s why you can’t wear it for more than ten minutes at a time. Additionally, you have to ‘watch’ a comedic performance once a week; otherwise, it will attempt to replace you when you wear it, truly becoming your ‘face.’”

Wound transference… This Sealed Artifact belongs to the Seer pathway. It corresponds to the Sequence of Bureau 8’s Miss Leah or higher, Lumian quickly deduced based on his experience.

He felt that the Clown Mask suited him well. With Pyromaniac and Flaming Jump, he could significantly increase his strength.

He was in need of changing his appearance, but the limitation of wearing it for only ten minutes made it similar to the Mystery Prying Glasses, albeit more convenient.

Moreover, Paper Figurine Substitutes and wound transference could effectively boost his survivability, but when it came to dealing with Zombies, Wraiths, Devils, or Desire Apostles, these abilities lacked specificity.

Emotional influences were currently a taboo for Lumian. While his psychological issues had been somewhat healed, the flames of pain couldn’t be fully extinguished. They still smoldered deep in his heart. If this emotional breakdown erupted, Termiboros would undoubtedly be grinning from end to end.

As Lumian pondered, Mr. K put the Clown Mask back into its exquisite wooden box and picked up an injector made of rubber hoses, a glass syringe, and a thin needle.

At that moment, a tube of bright red liquid quietly filled the syringe, as if it had just been extracted from a person’s body.

Mr. K gently shook the injector and said, “It’s called Lifeblood. Once injected into your body, it allows you to control your flesh and blood completely for a short period. You won’t need to maintain your human form deliberately, and your vital points will be safe. Moreover, you can envelop a target, corrode their body, and kill them from the inside.

“Simultaneously, you can transform into your own shadow and merge with the surrounding shadows. That way, you can secretly trail the enemy and avoid detection.

“With each injection, you’ll become closer to our Lord, closer to the most ancient appearance of humanity’s original form. Others and creatures won’t endure it well. Their bodies will collapse gradually with each injection, and they won’t be able to return to their original state. Their minds will be cloaked by shadows, making them crave flesh and blood, turning them into irrational monsters. However, we need not worry. As long as we devoutly believe in our Lord and remember to pray to Him always, there won’t be many issues with our bodies and minds.

“I’ve injected myself several times before. Am I not normal now?”

Lumian didn’t fully buy into it. I don’t think you’re normal… The flesh corrosion ability seems useful against Zombies…

Furthermore, he wasn’t devout when it came to the True Creator. He usually used psychological cues to seal the memories of His honorific name and didn’t pray at all.

“If you carry Lifeblood without injecting yourself, it won’t affect you other than making you crave flesh and blood,” Mr. K explained. He then picked up a wide-mouthed bottle filled with green liquid

filled with an alcoholic fragrance and retrieved a golden brooch carved into a Scotch Broom from it with his white palm that appeared sickly.

“This one’s called Decency.

“Once you wear it, you can acutely detect a target’s weaknesses. By symbolically giving them items, you can complete a Bribe, significantly weakening their attack, defense, or control over you for a certain period.

“In addition, you can Distort the target’s words, actions, and intentions. You can also Distort certain actions of yourself or others to create an environment that’s beneficial to you.”

Using Bribe to weaken the target’s attack, defense, or control… This ability is very versatile. It can be used against Zombies, Devils, or other Beyonders… If I use Distortion well, I can come up with all kinds of tricks… Lumian’s spirits lifted, believing this was what he wanted.

The next step was to see if the negative effects could be endured.

Mr. K continued, “It must be kept in liquor that exceeds 45 proof. Otherwise, it might result in arrest from official Beyonders or other factions at irregular intervals.

“You can’t wear it for more than fifteen minutes. In the following hour, you’ll become repulsive and disdainful. It’s best not to go out. Wait patiently until the negative effects fade.”

As a Hunter, how can I not be repulsed and despised? And it’s normal for regulars at Ol’ Tavern to carry two or three flasks of liquor with them… Sometimes, I can even use it to attract nearby factions to capture this characteristic for “fishing.” It’s a perfect part of certain traps… Lumian quickly made up his mind and said firmly, “I want Decency.”

Now, the question was whether this Sealed Artifact could be matched with the Shadow Branch to create a mystical item with both characteristics.

Mr. K respected Lumian's decision and didn't offer any persuasion.

He tossed the Decency brooch back into the wide-mouthed bottle of liquor, capped it, and handed it to Lumian.

Lumian swiftly caught it and mumbled, What if I'm not skilled enough to catch it and shatter the bottle? We'll exchange looks and then flee before the official Beyonders come after us?

Lumian gripped the bottle of liquor suspected to be absinthe and deliberately said, "I have something to report."

He briefly recounted the Werewolf incident and concluded, "The Rose School of Thought suffered repeated setbacks, yet they remain arrogant. I heard they also believe in the evil god, the Mother Tree of Desire."

Mr. K's gaze turned cold, and his voice carried an oppressive metallic quality.

"The evil god's believers are indeed becoming more impudent.

"Since some deities can't shoulder such a heavy responsibility, let us share Their burden."

Lumian could sense Mr. K's anger igniting as his Pyromaniac potion was showing signs of digestion.

After bidding farewell to Mr. K, he left the basement and closed his eyes in the corridor.

Through this experiment, combined with the fire in his heart when he advanced to Pyromaniac, Franca's words, the various situations in the market district, and the actions of the people of Rapus and the Southern Continent, he concluded his first Pyromaniac acting principle: "Pyromaniacs not only ignite matter but also the mind and society."

…

In the market district, Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 207.

Lumian gazed at the enticing green liquor bottle, contemplating the need for sturdy military flasks to prevent it from breaking during a potential fight. Simultaneously, he made the final decision—to utilize the Lucky One Beyonder characteristic and the Shadow Branch to create a mystical item.

He felt that Decency's powers didn't mesh well with the Shadow Branch, and its drawbacks were manageable. On the other hand, Sealed Artifacts offered decent effects and could be used independently.

Without any hesitation, Lumian penned a letter, seeking Madam Magician's aid in locating a demigod-level Artisan.

Afterward, he made his way to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches, summoned the messenger, and dispatched the Shadow Branch and Lucky One Beyonder characteristic, along with the letter, to the holder of the Major Arcana card.

In no time, Lumian spotted the puppet messenger materializing above the desk, dropping a thick stack of papers with a loud thud.

Bang!

The table groaned under the weight of the hefty object.

Lumian rose to his feet and noticed a response placed on top of the stack.

“No problem. I’ll assist you in making contact. The process will take some time, as will the crafting of the item. If you don’t mind, I’ll add a condition that the final product should be portable.”

“Additionally, while observing celestial phenomena, I sensed that you are on the verge of assimilating the Pyromaniac potion and can endure a new Inevitability boon. Here’s information about some creatures from the spirit world. You can study it beforehand and explore which contracts you might form to borrow their abilities.”

Madam Magician possesses knowledge of astromancy? Her predictions are remarkably accurate… Lumian felt a bit lightheaded as he glanced at the substantial stack of papers.

Having summarized the core principle of his initial Pyromaniac acting, he knew he wasn’t far from fully digesting it.

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Chapter 305 - 305 Test

305 Test

Lumian took his time with the thick stack of information on spirit world creatures. He stowed them and Aurore's grimoires in an iron cabinet he had acquired earlier.

But now, there were other pressing matters at hand.

Unscrewing the lid of a wide-mouthed bottle, he reached into the green liquor to retrieve the Scotch Broom brooch known as Decency.

His plan was to test the Sealed Artifact's abilities and its negative effects.

Waiting for a real battle wouldn't do; he needed to familiarize himself with it now. Figuring it out on the fly during a fight would be disastrous, leaving him unable to coordinate his Beyonder powers and attacks effectively.

He also wanted to test the extent of the brooch's adverse effects while he was still in good shape. After a battle that had taken a toll on his body and mind, it would be too risky to face those effects hastily.

Understanding the brooch's negative effects in advance would allow Lumian to make better choices when forced to use Decency, minimizing its influence on him.

A Hunter who wasn't familiar with their weapon was bound to fail!

Lumian placed the Scotch Broom brooch on the table before him, focusing his mind to sense its power.

As he did so, a gust of wind blew in from the open window, making his heart race. He quickly stood up, extended his right hand, and shut the window tight.

The moment the window closed, the room fell eerily silent, as if it had been sealed off from the outside world.

Lumian then walked over to the door, gently opening and closing it.

It seemed like the safe house had turned into a secluded sanctuary.

Seating himself again, Lumian exuded an aura that could provoke disgust and hatred in small animals—this was an application of Provocation.

Almost instantly, a rat appeared from nowhere, snarling and attacking him with its claws.

Without much effort, Lumian flicked his index finger and thumb, and a crimson spark shot out, incinerating the rat as it squealed in pain.

The rat desperately tried to escape while suffering the scorching pain, but the invisible force sealed all exits, leaving it trapped.

It lacked the ability to open a door.

Lumian nodded with satisfaction, using the rat to test the other abilities of the Decency brooch.

The test lasted for about 12 to 13 minutes, but Lumian couldn't be sure without a pocket watch. He decided to proceed with caution and removed the Decency brooch, throwing it into a container of green liquor.

Then, with another small crimson fireball, he ended the rat's life, filling the room with the smell of roasted fat.

After stowing away the container, Lumian left the safe house, ready to test the brooch's repellent effect on others.

The gas street lamps were already lit as he stepped out, and he immediately noticed the glares of pedestrians and vendors around him.

It felt as if they despised him deeply, wanting to attack him with knives, bottles of alcohol, or even an iron pot filled with food.

However, "Lion" Ciel's trademark golden-and-black hair seemed to deter them from acting on their impulses.

Th-this effect is equivalent to a large-scale Provocation… However, it's not within my control… Lumian assessed roughly, realizing that he couldn't fully control it. Under the unfriendly gazes, he walked along the roadside and made his way towards Avenue du Marché.

At that moment, two police officers dressed in black uniforms, their shoulders adorned with silver epaulets, and armed with revolvers strolled by the area.

Catching sight of Lumian, they immediately pointed at him and bellowed, "Halt right there! Routine inspection!"

The effects are truly potent… Lumian didn't waste a breath and swiftly turned on his heels, dashing away.

"Stop!"

The two officers shouted, drawing their revolvers and taking aim at Lumian.

He skillfully evaded a pedestrian's sneaky attempt to trip him, making a sharp turn into an alleyway blocked by a barricade. Without glancing back, he hurried into

Underground Trier.

He hadn't brought his carbide lamp, nor did he possess night vision. However, as a Pyromaniac, he could conjure light in any environment.

Crimson fireballs materialized above Lumian's head and on his shoulders, illuminating his path. Easily outpacing the police officers, he made his way toward another Underground Trier entrance near Rue des Blouses Blanches.

As he walked, Lumian abruptly twisted his body, narrowly avoiding a black shadow that lunged from a corner.

It was a snake-like creature with bluish-black scales.

The creature reared up, flicking its bright-red forked tongue in an aggressive stance, challenging Lumian.

It doesn't only arouse disgust and disdain from humans… They need to see or make contact with me to be influenced… Lumian sighed and shook his head, allowing one of the fireballs to shoot out and reduce the venomous snake into three charred pieces, emitting a burnt fragrance.

Having already gauged the strength and reach of the negative effects, he decided not to take any more risks. He found a nearby empty cave, extinguished the fireballs, and sat in the darkness, quietly waiting for the effects to wear off.

After what seemed like an hour, he stood up and conjured three crimson fireballs above his head, left shoulder, and right shoulder to illuminate the tunnel ahead.

In no time, Lumian found himself at an exit near Rue des Blouses Blanches. There, he spotted a figure with a carbide lamp emerging from a nearby tunnel.

With a grin, Lumian raised his right hand in a wave.

"Well, well, look who's wandering in Underground Trier like a rat."

It was Jenna.

As she caught sight of Lumian, her brow furrowed.

"Did you use Provocation on me? Why are you so irritating?"

Lumian replied vaguely, "Something like that."

Jenna couldn't hide her annoyance and blurted, "Dammit! Why did you use Provocation on me?"

Not bad. You didn't come over to beat me up. That means you still treat me as a friend… That's probably how strong the negative effects are when they're about to disappear… He smiled and explained,

“I encountered something that left me tainted with a dreadful aura, but it will soon fade away.”

Shifting gears, Lumian examined Jenna, who wore a light-white shirt and a faded yellow dress. Her hair cascaded down her back, and she wore a small Sun Sacred Emblem around her neck.

“What brings you to Underground Trier?”

Jenna, now looking more like a college student in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, pursed her lips and replied, “Meeting the two Purifiers. I wanted to show my devotion to god as you suggested. So I dressed in a way that the Church advocates, even wearing a Sun Talisman. But they guided me to Underground Trier, claiming it was to avoid crowds. Dammit, it’s just absurd to go around here dressed like this!”

As the negative effects of Decency waned, Jenna understood why she reacted strongly and calmly shared her experiences with Lumian.

“Did it work?” Lumian glanced at the brown wooden box in Jenna’s right hand but didn’t rush to ask what it contained.

Puzzled, Jenna inquired, “Yes, it did. Valentine, the Purifier, became much more receptive to me. Imre also changed, but they seem to be cautious and suspicious of me for some reason.”

“Maybe they think you’re trying to ingratiate yourself and have ulterior motives,” Lumian speculated, attempting to analyze the Purifiers’ mindset. He pointed at the wooden box Jenna was carrying with his chin. “Is that their reward for you?”

Jenna couldn’t help but smile.

“Exactly. They verified the information about Deep Valley Quarry and acknowledged its importance. As compensation, they gave me two main ingredients and one supplementary ingredient for the Instigator potion. I’ll collect the rest myself.”

“Franca probably has the rest of the supplementary ingredients.” Lumian mused. “The main ingredient for a Sequence 8 potion isn’t cheap, it’s precious, you know. Is the information about Deep Valley Quarry really that important?”

What did this entail?

Jenna tersely acknowledged his words.

“They didn’t elaborate much. The only thing they said was that the Purifiers can’t directly enter the quarry due to issues between the Churches. But they’ll keep an eye on it to prevent things from escalating.”

“They also want me to keep contacting the client to get more information from him. Apparently, part of the main ingredients for the potion is an advance payment,” Jenna explained.

Lumian nodded approvingly. “Makes sense.”

Jenna sighed. “I’m such a degenerate.”

“Why do you say that?” Lumian raised his eyebrows.

Jenna grabbed her hair. “I should have asked for enough money to pay off my debts before even thinking about the ingredients for the Instigator potion.”

“When you become an Instigator, that money won’t be a problem,” Lumian scoffed. “You’re not planning to stick around as a local singer forever to repay your debts, are you?”

Jenna fell silent for a moment before admitting, “But I don’t want to harm anyone.”

“Why not just target villains?” Lumian tried to ignite Jenna’s determination.

“Damn it, you’re the Instigator, not me, right?” Jenna muttered, adding, “How much should I pay Franca? We got the information together; it’s not fair if she doesn’t get anything.”

Lumian chuckled. “Considering the potion formula she gave you, even with a friend’s discount, you should pay her a minimum of 20,000 verl d’or.”

“20,000 verl d’or minimum…” Jenna’s face showed a hint of pain. “For now, I can only owe her. Do you think I’ll accumulate more debt the higher my Sequence? The potion formula and ingredients are so expensive…”

“But your earning potential will increase,” Lumian half-instigated, half-comforted.

He extinguished the three fireballs on his body and headed toward the exit of Underground Trier, Jenna’s carbide lamp lighting their way.

After a few steps, Jenna asked with curiosity, “Why did you create fireballs above your head and both shoulders? What’s the point?”

“Haven’t you heard of people carrying three lamps—one above their head, one on their left shoulder, and one on their right shoulder?” Lumian asked.

“No,” Jenna shook her head, intrigued, “Is it some mystical knowledge?”

“Nah, just folklore,” Lumian smiled. “I thought it looked cool, so I went with it.”

Jenna couldn’t help but curse, “Dammit! You’re so childish!”

As they chatted, they left Underground Trier and entered Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, where Franca gave them a suspicious look.

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Chapter 306 - 306 Ambivalence

306 Ambivalence

Lumian calmly recounted his encounter with Jenna in the depths of Underground Trier while he was enduring the air of repulsion and disdain.

Franca gave a slightly awkward smile and deftly changed the topic.

“How can you be repulsive and detestable? You didn’t lose control.”

Franca had encountered Beyonders on the Hunter pathway succumbing to a loss of control numerous times, most of them exuding traits that attracted hostility from those around them. This was the principal reason they were swiftly dealt with.

Lumian briefly explained, “I obtained a Sealed Artifact. Its negative effects manifest an hour after I remove it, causing me to exude repulsion and disdain.”

Jenna, curious, interjected, “What happens if you don’t take it off?”

Lumian’s lips curled as he replied, “Then it turns into an alarm, drawing the attention of nearby official Beyonders who’d like to apprehend me.”

“It’s quite the attention-seeker,” Franca remarked with a playful grin.

“It does have a fondness for ‘decency,’” Lumian said, his tone meaningful. Then, he added nonchalantly, “Its abilities lean heavily towards Bribe, with a touch of Distortion.”

Given the likelihood of needing to collaborate with Franca in the future to deal with Padre Guillaume Bénet, Lumian took the initiative to divulge the situation regarding the Decency brooch. However, he refrained from delving into intricate details, especially regarding the strength and range of its powers. After all, mystical items were a Beyonder’s ace in the hole. Exposing them risked a sense of vulnerability. Just as Franca had shared information about the Ring of Punishment while omitting the brass revolver and other items during their earlier operation.

It was a delicate balance—sharing yet withholding the full truth; building trust while maintaining essential precautions.

Franca didn’t press further. She pondered for a moment before saying, “It corresponds to a Sequence 7 Briber and a Sequence 6 Baron of Corruption from the Black Emperor pathway. It seems a Baron of Corruption met his end, melding his Beyonder traits with the objects on him to create the Sealed Artifact. Its abilities aren’t fully revealed.”

“Black Emperor?” Lumian had never heard of this Sequence, nor had Jenna.

“The deity appellation for the Lawyer pathway,” Franca whispered, excitement in her voice. “Rumor has it that Emperor Roselle achieved Black Emperor status before his demise—a true deity!”

For a brief moment, Lumian and Jenna were rendered speechless. Their expressions mirrored their astonishment.

Franca couldn’t accurately fathom Emperor Roselle’s standing in their eyes as genuine Intisians.

Had he—no, had He truly ascended to godhood?

“Rumors, mere rumors,” Franca hastened to add, lest her dependable image be tarnished in Jenna’s eyes.

After a few more exchanges, Jenna opened the wooden box in her right hand, revealing the smaller boxes within.

They contained a small, dark, hive-like heart, a sac exuding dark green liquid, and a slender, smoked tube-like substance.

Franca scrutinized them briefly before giving a nod of approval.

“The heart of the Demon Throat Honeyguide and the poison sac of the Dark Prowler—these are the main ingredients. Yes, the Dark Prowler is a peculiar two-headed snake.

“You’ve also acquired the Demon Throat Honeyguide’s syrinx. You only need blue Jimsonweed juice, fern powder, walnuts, and pure water… I have the blue Jimsonweed juice. The other three supplementary ingredients are easy to come by.”

Fern powder… Lumian recalled the supplemental ingredient for the Provoker potion shared a similarity. It implied being “susceptible to others’ words.”

In that light, Instigator and Provoker bore resemblance. Hunter and Demoness truly were neighboring, interchangeable pathways.

Noticing Jenna’s keenness to buy ferns and walnuts from the right shops and prepare pure water overnight, Franca cautioned, “Hold on a moment. Set yourself straight first. You’ve digested the Assassin potion, and chances of losing control with the Instigator potion are slim these days, but why not aim for the best? Wouldn’t it be wiser to minimize the chance of losing control entirely?”

Lumian scratched his chin and added, “I’m curious what kind of monster an Instigator would end up as after losing control.”

Jenna shot him a glare and settled onto the sofa, shutting her eyes and focusing on her breath.

Lumian sprawled in the armchair next to him, his arms draped over the armrests. He turned to Franca and inquired, “Have you gotten your hands on genuine mummy ashes?”

“Nope,” Franca shook her head, a touch of helplessness in her expression. “I even offered 500 verl d’or for 10 grams, but those guys keep pushing fakes. Worthless bunch. They can’t even tell the real from the fake!”

“Only 500 verl d’or?” Lumian teased. “Aren’t you rolling in it?”

“Normally, 10 grams go for just over 100 verl d’or. 500 is already a small fortune, alright?” Franca snapped back, her frustration evident. “And I’m not exactly swimming in money at the moment.”

Lumian nodded, getting why Franca’s funds were running dry.

Her infiltration of the Iron and Blood Cross Order wasn’t a true success. It could only be considered as aiding Lumian in reaching the goal. So, the reward she received wasn’t the main ingredients for the Demoness of Pleasure, but rather the privilege to buy them at a discount.

“How much more do you need?” Jenna’s eyes popped open, a willingness to help evident in her gaze.

Franca shook her head and replied, “If 500 verl d’or can’t get me the real stuff, neither will a grand. They’ll just think I’m a fool, waiting for me to bid higher.”

She then turned her gaze to Lumian.

“What’s your plan for now?”

Given time, she could likely snag actual mummy ashes in a fortnight or a month. However, Lumian needed her assistance within the next week, pushing her to consider searching for true mummies in the Star Highlands of the Southern Continent.

Lumian caught onto Franca’s unspoken message and mused, “Maybe consider a little arson and digesting the potion to some extent.”

This way, he could unlock the Contractee boon, garnering diverse abilities from different creatures through contracts.

As far as he knew, a freshly minted Contractee could only forge three contracts. Lumian intended to cherry-pick three from the four possible abilities: ones that impacted the Spirit Body or psyche, basic teleportation skills, a moderate level of disguise, and an ability akin to invisibility or shadow blending.

The final choice hinged on the information on creatures from the spirit realm. Maybe the willing creatures suitable for a contract with Lumian didn't wield matching skills.

Lumian was sure of one thing—all spirit world creatures could traverse the spirit realm—a basic form of teleportation. The variance lay in swiftness. If he struck a pact with White Paper, perhaps he'd manage only ten to twenty meters per jump. Not the optimal choice for traversing to the Southern Continent—exhaustion would likely make him lose control long before he arrived there.

"Arson… What's your thinking?" Franca sat cross-legged in the recliner.

Lumian recounted the acting principle he had deduced about the Pyromaniac.

Franca shared her insight based on her own experiences. "Upright acting is incitement, and inverted acting is instigation. They can all help you digest the potion. Wouldn't that be easy? Go down to the docks tomorrow and incite the dockworkers into a strike. The rallying cry will be for better pay."

Lumian shook his head slowly.

"If I can rally them into a strike and there's a good chance it'll get them some benefits or help them achieve their goals, I'll give it a shot. But if it's only going to bring disaster upon them, I'm not so keen on it.

"I can't stand exploiting others without benefiting them and causing harm instead —unless there's no other way. Then anyone can be sacrificed.

"Once there was this guy who always said that we could only grab more and have enough food if we united. But when we did unite to fight others for food, he took advantage of the chaos and made off with the food."

"You've got quite a bit of experience." Franca studied Lumian anew, feeling that he wasn't just as simple as Muggle's brother.

Jenna had been through similar situations.

Franca sighed and said,"As expected, you're quite the instigator in the upright sense. I'd be the same if I were you. Though I can put up a tough front, truth be told… haha, I can't bring myself to do it."

Lumian regarded her thoughtfully and spoke,

"I find you a bit paradoxical. Sometimes you're seasoned, well-informed, and have a knack for analyzing things. Other times, you're foolish, innocent, and naive."

Lumian had only encountered such a contradictory disposition in one other person —his sister Aurore.

Stirred by Lumian's string of words, Franca blurted out, "Are you trying to provoke me? How am I foolish or naive?"

At this, she caught Jenna's disapproving glance.

"Ahem." Franca cleared her throat and went on, "It's because I have this core kindness and certain expectations for the world. Even after seeing how harsh life can be, I still cherish life. Sigh, most in my group are like that. Only a few are resilient, brilliant, and agile. They seem to never be daunted by hardships or moral dilemmas."

The Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society? Why do they have such similarities? Lumian nodded, choosing not to probe further.

With Jenna's plan to gather the remaining supplemental ingredients the following day to advance as an Instigator, Lumian swiftly departed from Rue des Blouses Blanches and returned to Auberge du Coq Doré.

As he made his way up the stairs, Lumian caught sight of Anthony Reid, the information broker, coming down with a suitcase.

"Moving out?" Lumian inquired.

"That's right." Anthony Reid, still donning his military-green camouflage, gave a slight nod.

Lumian chuckled and remarked, "Didn't you mention some unfinished business in the market district?"

"The lead's gone cold." Anthony Reid let out a soft sigh.

Gone cold? Suddenly, Lumian recalled having seen a parliamentary election poster in the other man's room. He prodded, "Because Hugues Artois is dead?"

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Chapter 307 - 307 Instigation

307 Instigation

Upon hearing Lumian's question, Anthony Reid, his round face slightly pudgy and his skin with a slight sheen, fixed his dark brown eyes on him for a moment before responding, "I'm not sure what you're getting at."

The information broker's emotions appeared steady, and his expression seemed unaffected. It was almost as if Hugues Artois's demise hadn't affected him in the least.

Lumian's grin widened, and he didn't press further. Pointing toward the lower level, he suggested, "Let me buy you a drink. You've aided me in the past, and we've fought side by side. Consider it a parting gesture."

Anthony Reid scratched his retreating, light-yellow hairline with his free hand, his other holding a suitcase, pondering briefly before conceding, "Okay."

Descending the narrow, gas-lit staircase, the duo entered the basement bar and settled at the counter.

"What's your poison?" Lumian inquired in a casual tone, as if he'd just stepped into his own abode.

"Fennel absinthe," Anthony Reid replied succinctly.

"Absinthe, eh?" Lumian chuckled, producing a verl d'or silver coin and four coppet copper coins. He tossed them to the barkeep, Pavard Neeson, who sported a ponytail. "Two glasses of Somersault."

Somersault was bar parlance, signifying a double serving of fennel absinthe and a measure of "little mummy."

The latter took seven licks, while the former required twelve.

Pavard Neeson deftly flipped over standard cups and filled them with a dreamy green liquid for Lumian and Anthony Reid.

As Lumian took a sip, he savored the familiar bitterness and revitalization. He observed Pavard Neeson, whose dark brown beard framed his lips, muttering in a low, ingratiating tone,

"Ciel, got any of them peculiar drugs?"

The bar owner and amateur painter believed that Ciel, a notorious mob leader, surely possessed a couple of routes for obtaining proscribed substances.

Lumian caressed the glass with his thumb and smiled, inquiring, “What kind of drug are you after?”

Recognizing that Anthony Reid was an information broker often entangled in illicit affairs, Pavard Neeson did not hold back, explaining in hushed tones,

“Banned psychotropic drugs. Sigh, when that odd tree affected me, I created the draft I was most proud of. Actually, it wasn’t just my most satisfying piece; it embodied the aesthetics I’d always strived for but never reached. It perfectly channeled my thoughts and convictions. Since then, that sensation’s eluded me completely. Every stroke of mine has turned into dogsh*t! I’m considering experimenting with psychotropic drugs, hoping to recapture that sensation.”

Lumian took another sip of the misty absinthe, his lips curling in a derisive smile,

“If I were you, I’d steer clear of painting altogether. You lack the innate aptitude.”

Without waiting for Pavard Neeson’s retort, he chuckled and stated, “Relying on drugs for passable creations signifies your dearth of talent!”

“But many famous painters have resorted to it…” Pavard Neeson began, only to be cut off by Lumian. He clicked his tongue and interjected, “That’s an indication their creative faculties are waning, their fountain of inspiration drying up.

“Isn’t that cheating? Pitting drug-fueled works against those of other artists, barely eking out a victory. Earning a spot in an exhibition and proudly proclaiming to every visitor: ‘Behold, I’m despicable. I possess an inferiority complex. Drugs are my prowess, and demons are my parents.’”

Seeing Pavard Neeson’s visage turn ashen, Lumian spread his arms slightly, probing, “Does that fill you with pride?

“Should you possess talent, you’d no longer be an amateur painter. Even if critical acclaim eluded you, and the World’s Artists Exhibition snubbed you, private galleries would come seeking. You understand the harsh reality better than I do.”

At this juncture, Lumian’s smile broadened.

“Drugs won’t save you. It’s available to all, like a common commodity. When everyone resorts to it, won’t they be pitted against their innate skill and standards?”

Pavard Neeson’s lips quivered, yet he remained speechless.

With a somber expression, he took a couple of steps back, slumping into his seat, as if his spirit had vacated his body.

Anthony Reid, who had been quietly sipping fennel absinthe, turned his gaze to Lumian. “You’re not a fan of those forbidden psychiatric drugs?”

“Otherwise?” Lumian scoffed.

Anthony Reid shifted his attention to Pavard Neeson, visibly grappling with his inner turmoil, and spoke contemplatively. “You seem to have swayed him.”

“I merely stoked the embers of his guilt,” Lumian replied with calm composure.

Anthony Reid nodded gently. “But what if your persuasion falls short?”

Lumian laughed. “I’m not his godfather.”

If he couldn’t sway him, so be it.

A brief pause fell upon Anthony Reid before he turned his gaze back to Lumian.

“Your method of dissuasion deviates from your usual approach. Is this acting?”

Impressively observant and astute, as expected from a Mid-Sequence Beyonder of the Spectator pathway… If I can kindle the inner fervor within a Spectator’s heart, it should greatly aid my digestion… Lumian mused inwardly. Holding his glass of verdant liquid, he looked ahead and replied, “I stumbled upon some fliers earlier. They made mention of Hugues Artois deserting his troops during the war against the Loen Kingdom a few years back, leading to countless casualties.”

Anthony Reid remained silent, savoring his fennel absinthe in quietude.

Lumian’s gaze flickered toward the vacant bar counter as he continued, “I recall you wrestled with the lingering effects of PTSD from that war a few years ago.”

With a gulp, Anthony Reid took a swig of the green liquor.

Lumian opted to not bring up the parliamentary election poster found in the information broker’s room. He glanced at the vacant shell that was Pavard Neeson and mumbled to himself, “If the sole motivation is animosity towards Hugues Artois, then news of his assassination would be met with jubilation and him drinking until he dropped at the bar.

“But if one wishes to unravel the reason behind Hugues Artois’s actions, understand how he wormed his way into politics and a parliamentary bid despite his past, and uncover the strings being pulled in his favor, one must seek out other breadcrumbs to grant the departed some semblance of peace.

“The official Beyonders should be on this case, but they labor under too many constraints. They lack the untamed boldness of wild Beyonders.”

Seated still, Anthony Reid took another swig of fennel absinthe.

Lumian chuckled.

“It’s indeed a vexing conundrum. The hurdles are countless, and the perils are real. Surrender becomes a tempting option for everyone. In the end, though, Hugues Artois lies deceased. The instigator of that tragedy rests in the grave. The departed souls should find some solace.”

Anthony Reid ceased his imbibing, his middle-aged visage betraying no emotion.

Lumian glanced his way, lowered his tone, and smiled knowingly.

“Folks plagued by severe mental ills can’t ascend far in the Spectator path. And even if they do plateau, external stimuli can trigger catastrophic lapses, transforming them into monstrosities. In this ever-more perilous world, stability is but a distant wish for flawed Beyonders.”

At this juncture, Lumian reined in his expression and fixed his gaze upon Anthony Reid’s profile. He inquired, his voice resonating with gravitas, “Do you fancy departing laden with remorse and reluctance, languishing in the throes of becoming a monster, shying away from your former comrades, or do you dare venture forth in pursuit of the truth, courting danger, and crafting your own heroic saga?”

Without acknowledging Anthony Reid’s response, Lumian gracefully alighted from the barstool, lifted his fennel absinthe, and downed the remainder in a single gulp.

With that, he whispered into Anthony Reid’s ear, “I contributed to Hugues Artois’s demise. We’re still untangling his problem.”

Observing Anthony Reid’s slight tremor, Lumian straightened up and exited the subterranean bar without casting a backward glance.

He strolled back into Room 207, not bothering to shut the door behind him, and lit the carbide lamp.

With a casual swivel, he spun the chair around and settled into it, his posture easy as he fixated on the dim corridor outside.

Lumian waited in abnormal silence, as he held a certainty that the figure he awaited would materialize.

As moments ticked away, the couple’s voices escalated into a quarrel anew, and the rowdy drunkards began to trickle onto the street.

The soft patter of hesitant steps drew near Room 207, each sound echoing the uncertainty.

A sly grin played upon Lumian’s lips, and he reclined in the chair, his gaze steady on the door.

Before too long, Anthony Reid stepped into view, garbed in a military-green shirt and matching pants, capped off by tall leather boots. His hair lay cropped and thin.

Standing within the circle of light cast by the carbide lamp, he regarded Lumian seated at the wooden table, a smirk adorning his lips. His features danced in a contorted display.

In a rich timbre, he intoned, “I know you’re trying to provoke me. I know you’re acting, but… you’re correct…”

Anthony Reid, middle-aged and weathered, raised his right hand and pressed it to his chest, his expression one of fierce resolve.

“Over these past few years, my heart has been seared by anguish and righteous anger.”

A knowing smile graced Lumian’s face as he shut his eyes momentarily, sensing the Pyromaniac potion digesting a little.

He rose from his seat and addressed Anthony Reid, saying, “Truth wields the mightiest power of persuasion.”

Anthony Reid felt a weight lift after speaking, the inner conflict and confusion subsiding.

He ventured into Room 207, the door clicking shut behind him. His eyes swept over the surroundings in a swift assessment.

“Did you truly eliminate Hugues Artois? How deep did your investigation penetrate?”

“Celia Bello, the one who assassinated Hugues Artois, is a friend of mine. It was I who first unearthed the heretic cults supporting Hugues Artois,” Lumian responded in a matter-of-fact tone before extending a sincere apology. “My earlier words held a deceit, and for that, I’m sorry.”

Anthony Reid was taken aback.

“Which statement?”

A mischievous grin curved Lumian’s lips.

“Actually, we haven’t even embarked on the trail to uncover the people and forces behind Hugues Artois.”

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Chapter 308 - 308 Incomprehensible Choice

308 Incomprehensible Choice

The plump, middle-aged Anthony Reid found himself taken aback. But after a brief moment, he grinned in a self-deprecating way and uttered, “I was so rattled that I couldn’t even judge the authenticity of that sentence. As anticipated, a Spectator must take a seat in the audience.”

Lumian remained calmly seated, his smile unwavering.

“No, it’s not that simple. Why did I leap off the barstool? Why did I murmur into your ear from behind? My aim was to shield you from my subtle expressions and involuntary body language. In those moments, your emotions were already stirred, blurring your ability to decipher my true intent.”

A short pause followed Anthony Reid’s contemplative silence, then he spoke,

“That’s one reason. Another lies in your characteristic demeanor. I don’t know if you’ve caught on, but you tend to put on a bit of a show, appear nonchalant, or in modern terms, act cool.

“Just then, I believed those actions, given the circumstances, were in line with your usual behavior, aimed at lending weight to your words. So, suspicion didn’t even cross my mind.”

A chuckle escaped Lumian’s lips.

“It’s only natural for a lad like me to yearn for a touch of coolness, a bit of swagger. It also conveniently masks my true motives. Actually, both are genuine. That’s why they remain impervious to scrutiny.”

It was akin to him having Fire Ravens circling him with one hand in his pocket, unleashing them on his adversaries as he advanced. First, it was undeniably cool, and second, he seized the chance to grasp Mr. K’s finger to avert any potential mishaps.

Anthony Reid pondered momentarily before nodding.

“Only a superficial motive, steeped in authenticity, can truly deceive a Spectator.”

Raising his right foot over his left knee, Lumian steered the conversation back on track.

“Our journey to unveil the people and forces behind Hugues Artois hasn’t yet commenced, as we are engaged in more pressing matters. But fear not, we shall delve into this matter next week. We possess the relevant sources of information as well.”

Lumian’s strategy involved Jenna delving deeper into Hugues Artois’s background through the Purifiers, exploring ways she could “assist.”

As the one responsible for Hugues Artois’s demise, it was logical for Jenna to keep tabs on the investigation’s progress, hoping to unearth all details without arousing the official Beyonders’ suspicion. These thoughts and tendencies were inherent in Jenna, so Lumian didn’t need to fuel them further. Just a reminder would suffice.

In due course, the Purifiers could subtly guide Jenna and her companions toward actions they might find inconvenient. This would undeniably supply Anthony Reid’s investigation with invaluable leads.

Anthony Reid’s deep brown eyes mirrored Lumian’s figure as he absorbed the discourse in silence.

The information broker offered an almost imperceptible nod.

“I’ll stay a while longer.”

Engaging with Spectators of the Beyonder path is straightforward. There’s no need to concoct another tale or search for an excuse to sway him. He can ascertain the truth for himself… Lumian flashed a grin and gestured toward the bed. “Take a seat.”

This way, he needn’t expose Jenna’s true identity or her role as a Purifier informant.

Anthony Reid stood near the door, rooted in place, and spoke, “You’ve more or less sussed out what’s happened to me. Is there something else you want me to add?”

“I’d prefer a more detailed account,” Lumian responded without much ceremony.

Having been through the Poison Spur Mob, the Bliss Society, the Cordu catastrophe, Ruhr and Michel’s deaths, and the explosion at the Goodville Chemical Factory, Lumian found the evil gods and their minions abnormally repulsive. His casual demeanor had been replaced by a newfound seriousness.

Once, he’d believed that people could fancy whatever beliefs they pleased—that it didn’t concern him. Now, his perspective had entirely changed. He held that only heretics who’d gone to their grave were the good ones. The living ones were ticking time bombs of doom, liable to unleash havoc on him and his companions sooner or later.

So, he wasn't just spinning tales for Anthony Reid. He truly planned on delving into Hugues Artois' affairs and uncovering more of those heretics when he could spare a moment.

Moreover, this could endear him to Mr. K and the Aurora Order.

Of course, it did seem quite odd for a wanted mob leader to be lending a hand to the authorities in taking down cultists.

Anthony Reid's expression darkened as he said, "Towards the end of the war with the Loen Kingdom, my comrades and I were stationed at a vital route in the northern foothills of the Hornacis mountain range. Our commanding officer was Major Hugues Artois.

"We were split into three companies, each at different positions. We were to prevent small Loen Kingdom Beyonder teams from crossing the treacherous path and attacking us from the rear, as well as defend against direct assaults.

"That night, gunshots and cannon fire suddenly shattered my sleep. I watched as my comrades were torn apart, one by one, from behind. Their heads exploding, bodies rent asunder. The earth became a sea of blood…"

At this point, Anthony Reid's breath quickened, as if he was reliving the trauma.

He paused for a moment before continuing, "In the midst of that war, I had a fortuitous encounter that pushed my Sequence upward. I never reported it to Hugues Artois. Using my newfound abilities, I managed to break through the encirclement with four wounded comrades and retreated.

"Two of them were gravely hurt and were left behind on the mountain path for— forever. I can still see their pained and angry gazes.

"At first, I thought maybe one of the other positions had been compromised, or that Loen's airships had dropped troops behind us under cover of darkness. But later, I realized that the reason was that Hugues Artois's company had chosen to retreat without informing us, after encountering only a probing attack!"

Lumian pondered for a moment before replying, "When Hugues Artois ordered the retreat, didn't those soldiers question it? Didn't they try to get word to the other two positions?"

"Hugues Artois was our commanding officer, and he knew how to give rousing speeches. Plus, he had a warrant supposedly signed by General Philip," Anthony Reid said, his expression grim. "The soldiers back then assumed he had already passed on orders to the other positions. I still can't wrap my head around why he'd sacrifice us. It wouldn't have taken much time or caused him any harm."

"Maybe he was overwhelmed and forgot," Lumian suggested, not out to defend the late Hugues Artois, merely offering a possible explanation.

Anthony Reid shook his head.

“He wasn’t a green recruit on his first battlefield. He had proven his mettle in prior fights, showed his leadership under duress.”

Lumian didn’t delve further, allowing Anthony Reid to continue.

“Once we found out the truth, the three of us fought to bring Hugues Artois to military court, but it was futile. They’d simply tell us that imagination wasn’t evidence.

“Helpless, we watched Hugues Artois shift into politics after the war and rise through the ranks.

“My other two comrades were frail to start with. They passed away burdened by fury and pain. When Hugues Artois threw his hat in the ring for the Enlightenment Party in the market district’s parliamentary election, I ended up here.”

Lumian nodded slightly and inquired, “Being an information broker, that’s to hide your true identity?”

“No, I’ve been scraping by as an information broker for a few years now,” Anthony Reid replied with a wry smile. “Plus, this cover helps me dig deeper into Hugues Artois’ dealings.”

“Any breakthroughs?” Lumian asked naturally.

Anthony Reid’s expression darkened as he answered, “Hugues Artois’ foray into politics seems unremarkable. He rode General Philip’s coattails and climbed the ladder. His eloquence caught the eye of several senior Enlightenment Party MPs. And he forged ties with a handful of ex-noble families.”

“Is General Philip a concern?” Lumian queried, straightforward as ever.

Anthony Reid sighed slowly, his voice heavy, “The general met his end before I could investigate him. Official word is—illness took him.”

Lumian posed a few more questions before saying, “I’ll catch up with you when I’ve got more to share.”

“Sure.” Anthony Reid understood Lumian’s sincerity.

…

After departing Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian made his way back to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches. He swung open the iron cabinet, retrieving a hefty stack of information concerning the denizens of the spirit world.

Within the assortment, he discovered a notebook labeled ‘Sights in the Spirit World.’ Flipping through a couple of pages, he could feel a surge of frustration and

anxiety creeping into his mind.

His immediate aim wasn't to grasp the intricacies of the spirit world, but rather to pinpoint suitable creatures from that realm. Thus, he closed the notebook and delved into the introductions of the various spirit world entities.

Somewhat inexplicably, after poring over the pages for over half an hour, Lumian sensed his mental energy draining away. His thoughts seemed to evaporate, forcing him to bring his study session to an abrupt close. He sprawled out on the bed, drifting into slumber.

Early the next morning, Lumian arrived at Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, and rang the doorbell.

Franca had already risen from her sleep, attired in her customary shirt and breeches. She directed her gaze towards Lumian and inquired, "What brings you here so early?"

Lumian's eyes flicked towards Jenna, who occupied the living room, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Isn't today the day Jenna advances to being an Instigator? I'm here to witness the moment."

A frown played across Franca's features as she muttered, "You seem quite concerned about her."

"Absolutely," Lumian affirmed, his grin widening. "Once she's an Instigator, she can aid me in dealing with Guillaume Bénet. While I can't exactly count on her for a direct confrontation, she'll excel at launching sneak attacks and surveying the surroundings to forestall any potential mishaps."

Jenna emitted a derisive snort, while Franca offered a mix of exasperation and amusement through a tongue click. "Your words are like honey."

"The kind that's already been digested?" Lumian chuckled, his self-awareness evident.

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Chapter 309 - 309 Restoring Confidence

309 Restoring Confidence

Naturally, Franca caught onto Lumian's true intentions; otherwise, her Instigator potion would've been a wasted effort. She felt satisfied that Lumian was one who wouldn't falter in a battle of sophistry, and she hoped he could maintain that.

"Come on in." Franca gestured for Lumian to step into the living room.

Right then, boxes already occupied the coffee table, containing Demon Throat Honeyguide and other ingredients.

Simply glancing at these items stirred something in Lumian, an urge to devour them.

Thankfully, it wasn't overwhelming. It was more like hungry folks eying a chef grilling lamb.

Jenna's focus had returned to the ingredients. Gazing at the white porcelain broth bowl with its dual handles and cover, she found it absurd that she was going to consume it the same way she had consumed the Assassin potion.

How was this potion concoction? It seemed more like cocktail mixing or broth preparation!

Mysticism was nowhere to be found!

Jenna inhaled deeply, then poured 100 milliliters of pure water into the broth bowl using a measuring cylinder. She added the Demon Throat Honeyguide and the Dark Prowler poison sac.

Amidst the bubbling sounds, the two main ingredients fused in the pure water.

A manifestation of the law of Beyonder characteristics convergence… Lumian observed closely, holding his words.

Franca carefully unsheathed a ritual dagger and conjured a wall of spirituality around the living room.

The hive-like heart and the dark-green poison sac began to dissolve simultaneously, coloring the pure water in the white porcelain bowl with a gleaming black hue.

Jenna then added the syrinx of the Demon Throat Honeyguide, five drops of blue Jimsonweed juice, and 10 grams of fern powder. Finally, she tossed in an unpeeled walnut.

Watching the walnut disappear as if swallowed by crimson molten steel, Jenna couldn't help but feel a shiver of fear.

Can this thing really be drunk?

"Not bad. It's exactly like the Instigator potion I brewed before," Franca commended with an easy smile.

Of course it's the same. Concocting a potion is that simple… Lumian thought to himself.

Franca waved her hand, her confidence unwavering, and continued, "No need to fret. Downing a Sequence 8 potion directly won't trouble you. Plus, you've already digested the Assassin potion."

Infected by her confidence, Jenna's expression gradually turned resolute.

Oh, you're employing Instigation, are you? Is this an upright approach for an Instigator? Lumian grasped Franca's intentions, yet he didn't call her out.

Jenna steeled herself and composed her mind. She picked up the double-handled broth bowl and lifted it to her lips.

Gazing at the obsidian potion fizzing with tiny bubbles, as though harboring hidden desires and ill intent, she tilted her head back and poured the contents from the porcelain bowl into her mouth.

An acute pain coursed from her mouth down to her esophagus, radiating to her brain and other parts of her body.

The pain jolted her awake, memories of the explosion at Goodville Chemical Factory flashing through her mind. She gained fresh insights, a better understanding of the true intentions and thoughts of those involved. She sensed malevolent thoughts that had either come to fruition or were waiting to be acted upon.

Soon, Jenna's heart was filled with rage, loathing, and a desire to obliterate those individuals and matters. She felt an urge to cease holding back and unleash her emotions.

Recalling Franca's repeated warnings, she resisted letting her hatred, anger, and desires take the reins. She clenched her fists, standing still.

Her shadow seemed to deepen, and her brownish-yellow hair appeared to lengthen.

In a little over ten seconds, the pain gradually receded, and Jenna reconnected with her body.

It's indeed quite easy… Most of the reason why I'm feeling half-dead after gulping down potions at a low Sequence is due to Inevitability's corruption… Lumian sighed.

Jenna swiftly gathered her thoughts and stretched her limbs, examining the changes in her body.

"Oh, my body's definitely gotten stronger. And I've got this new ability, Instigation…"

"It's actually pretty great. Instigation is more than just an ability. It lets me feel what others are feeling—emotions, desires, even malice. It sharpens my thinking and analytical skills. Ha, I'll have to use this to my advantage. Can't have Ciel always making fun of my smarts and performance…

"Even if I don't speak, using Instigation actively will make me seem more reliable and approachable. It'll help folks around me think better of me."

"With the Instigation ability and some clever talk, I can plant certain thoughts or desires in someone's mind, making them choose to act the way I want…"

After a quick adjustment, Jenna confirmed that her combat skills hadn't improved significantly, but she could be much more valuable in other situations.

"How'd it go? Told you there wouldn't be any trouble," Franca said with a grin, her satisfaction not hidden at all.

Jenna's blue eyes still had traces of black threads in them. She let out a relieved breath and replied, "I was a bit worried earlier."

"That's just the way it is at low Sequences. You'll need to be careful when you move up to Sequence 7," Franca reminded Jenna, ensuring she didn't underestimate the risks of a potion.

Jenna nodded and said to Franca, "I owe you 30,000 verl d'or, including this time. I'll pay you back in installments."

She included the Assassin potion from earlier.

Franca had discussed this with Jenna the night before. She had intended to treat it as a gift. After all, she could continue selling the potion formula and information about the Deep Valley Quarry. However, seeing Jenna's determination, she decided to accept it after some thought.

With a smile, she replied at that moment, "No need to rush. Take your time repaying. You could even stretch it into a 20 or 30-year loan."

Lumian couldn't help but click his tongue and turned to Jenna. "Has the compensation from the Goodville Chemical Factory come through?"

"Imre and Valentine told me the legal process is done. Once the auction wraps up, the assets will be distributed—perhaps in two weeks." Jenna didn't quite grasp why Lumian was suddenly bringing this up. "Julien and I should get around 6,000 verl d'or. We'll split it evenly after settling our debts. Honestly, I don't really want it, but he won't agree for sure."

Lumian nodded and inquired further, "And what about your father's compensation?"

"Because of the Goodville Chemical Factory explosion, the court's given its final say, but the factory owner's dragging his feet. Ugh, is he trying to move his assets out before he pays up?" Jenna's tone carried a hint of anger as she spoke about it.

A chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.

"How about this? We pay a visit to the families waiting for compensation soon. You 'instigate' them, and I'll 'incite' them. We alternate, gather them at the factory owner's place, and demand what's owed to them. It helps them and gives us a chance to digest the potion."

"The factory owner's got a bunch of armed guards, and he's got ties to the police. What if they hurt the people just asking for their dues? They're already going through so much," Jenna expressed her concern.

Lumian arched an eyebrow and replied, "The court has made its decision. They've got every right to seek their compensation. If anyone dares to fire shots, I promise they won't shoot again. Don't worry, with us around, they'll be safe. Besides, you can give the heads-up to the Purifiers. They'll understand."

Jenna was convinced, her thoughts racing.

"Dammit, you're inciting me!"

While she grumbled, she accepted Lumian's idea and decided to gather information as soon as possible to figure out where the factory owner was now residing.

Simultaneously, another thought crossed her mind. "Now that I'm an Instigator, I need to interact with the entrustee. It's a task from the Purifiers. Franca, when's the next meetup?"

Franca said indignantly, "Next weekend. Reaching out to the entrustee is risky business. The Purifiers are kind of taking advantage of your lack of knowledge by only advancing you one ingredient for the Instigator potion. If it were me, I'd demand a better deal!"

Habitual instigation… Lumian chuckled inwardly.

As Franca and Jenna tidied up the coffee table, Lumian remained seated in an armchair, looking all repulsive.

After a while, Jenna approached him, her body lowering.

Lumian turned his head in surprise.

With a confident smirk, Jenna adjusted her hair.

“I can safely say that you didn’t just show up to watch me drink that potion for dealing with Guillaume Bénet.”

Her grin was playful and teasing. Though she wasn’t wearing makeup, it brought Lumian back to their first meeting when she was an underground singer at Salle de Bal Brise.

Before Lumian could respond, Jenna straightened up and strolled toward the bathroom, leaving behind a casual question.

“Is it really so hard to admit that we’re friends and you care about your friends?”

…

On his way back to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian mulled over his role as Pyromaniac.

He was teetering on the edge of taking the first step towards digesting the potion; his hunger for more acting chances was insatiable.

Though I must set aflame minds and society, I cannot overlook the elemental act of kindling substances and fulfilling fire’s symbolic essence.

Who would be a suitable candidate for burning…

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian’s gaze spotted Baron Brignais.

The mob leader, who usually emulated Gehrman Sparrow, had discarded his customary poise and genteel demeanor. Instead, he marched restlessly and agitatedly along Avenue du Marché, his eyes darting around incessantly.

Lumian fixated on him briefly, though Baron Brignais remained oblivious.

Baffled, he retraced his steps to Salle de Bal Brise and inquired of Sarkota, who had once served under Baron Brignais, “Do you have any knowledge of what happened to Brignais? I observed him in a state of great unease just now.”

The reticent Sarkota glanced towards the café’s glass window and replied, “Baron Brignais’s illegitimate son has gone missing.”

Illegitimate son? Gone missing? Lumian’s thoughts immediately turned to the young lad Baron Brignais had picked up from the Suhit steam locomotive station.

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Chapter 310 - 310 Encounter

310 Encounter

“How did he go missing?” Lumian asked, puzzled.

Baron Brignais wasn’t just a mob leader; he was a Beyonder, too. As long as he was attentive, how could he allow his child to disappear?

Moreover, who in the market district would dare to snatch his child?

Sarkota shook his head. “He didn’t provide details.”

Could it be the machinations of the Rose School of Thought, striving to expose the truth about the Savoie Mob from Baron Brignais? With recent events woven into the mix, Lumian had some unconfirmed theories.

After a brief pause of thought, he inquired, “Do you know what Brignais’s illegitimate son looks like?”

Sarkota nodded. “The baron’s underlings came by with a portrait that resembles a photograph.”

A portrait that resembles a photograph… Had he invoked ritualistic magic? Lumian’s memory recalled the contents of Aurore’s grimoires.

Gazing at the brilliant sunlight streaming through the window, he turned to Sarkota.

“Gather some men and aid Brignais.”

Regardless of whether the child was ensnared by the Rose School of Thought or had truly gone missing, if they couldn’t locate him soon, the outcome would be grim.

At his age, even without additional complications, his fate as a street urchin wouldn’t be kind.

“Understood.” Sarkota refrained from inquiring why his boss had decided to lend a hand to Baron Brignais.

After all, it wasn’t yet noon, and Salle de Bal Brise had just commenced operations. The real hustle and bustle didn’t kick in until three or four in the afternoon. Apart from the janitors and kitchen staff, most folks had time aplenty.

Lumian ordered a glass of ice water topped with sugar-infused alcohol and stood on the café's balcony, observing the mobsters interrogating vagrants along Avenue du Marché.

After a while, "Rat" Christo appeared. The diminutive smuggling chief emerged from an alley, trailed by seven or eight dogs of varying hues and breeds, and entered the diagonally opposite alley.

Before long, he drew nearer to Salle de Bal Brise.

At this sight, Lumian finished the remaining alcohol, placed the glass on the railing, and leaped from the second floor to the street.

Christo, his two rat-like whiskers wiggling, approached with a sycophantic grin.

"Good morning, Ciel."

"Are you aiding Brignais in locating his illegitimate son?" Lumian inquired directly.

Christo nodded gently. "Indeed. He personally reached out to me for assistance. Coincidentally, these kids excel at tracking down people."

As the "Rat" spoke, he affectionately patted the dogs' heads.

They alternated between gathering and dispersing, following a distinct scent.

Baron Brignais truly cares for that illegitimate son… Lumian advised "Rat" Christo with a pensive air, "There might be something peculiar about this situation. Stay vigilant. I don't want you to go missing before finding the boy."

The Rose School of Thought being responsible for abducting the boy was always one of the possibilities.

Christo was taken aback, pondered for a moment, and remarked, "There's indeed something amiss. In recent years, we've never heard of Brignais having such a son. Moreover, he holds him in high regard. Why would the boy vanish?"

A sudden appearance of an illegitimate child? Lumian's intuition suggested this might be more intricate than he presumed.

After contemplating briefly, Christo gratefully said, "Ciel, your intellect surpasses mine."

"Don't you possess medicine to enhance your mind?" Lumian inquired, half jesting and half curious.

As Christo allowed the dogs to nuzzle his trousers, he sheepishly smiled and replied, "Indeed, but they're short-term solutions. Their effects are middling, nowhere near the potency of a potion. Damn it, excessive consumption can lead to

complications."

Lumian shifted the conversation, asking, "Do you possess authentic mummy ashes?"

Christo assumed an enigmatic expression.

"How much do you require? I can provide you with the best version. That 'Little Minx' Jenna often frequents Franca. She's a tricky one. Just days ago, Franca inquired if I had genuine mummy ashes. Tsk, even the Boss is having trouble."

Ciel also had numerous dancers and actresses as mistresses. Despite his youth, he still relied on medicine.

"I mean true mummy ashes." Lumian stroked his chin.

"I don't." Christo shook his head. "That stuff is ineffective, and I don't know who propagated the falsehood, but I do have a concoction that can satisfy all your paramours. It's composed of various herbs; I merely claim mummy ashes as the primary ingredient."

"Did Franca buy it?" Lumian inquired with a grin.

"She did." Christo cooperatively chuckled. "Probably because the Boss is too embarrassed to approach me."

Her facade was impeccable. She concealed her true desires from the "Rat," seeking the so-called "ineffective" mummy ashes… Lumian sighed and confessed openly, "I need genuine mummy ashes. They possess mystical uses. Keep an eye out since you often engage with merchants trading in alchemical materials."

"No problem." Christo suspected that Ciel aimed to preserve his dignity and wouldn't acknowledge his quest for such a remedy. He insisted on mysticism as a pretext for seeking mummy ashes but didn't expose him. After all, it was a minor matter.

Observing Christo's persistent search for Baron Brignais's missing illegitimate son with his dogs, Lumian turned on his heel and made his way back to the dance hall.

As he was about to approach the bar counter, Termiboros's commanding voice reverberated in his ears: "To the cellar."

To the cellar… Lumian's initial thought was that the Inevitability angel had something planned.

"Which cellar?" he inquired.

"The one used to store ingredients," replied Termiboros.

So proactive, so eager… What's He plotting? Lumian began to wonder if there was an underlying scheme at play.

Termiboros continued, “It’s a stroke of fate for you. Even if you don’t go, it will find its way to you. It’s destined.”

You’re giving me chills… Termiboros won’t likely put me in immediate danger right now… What could be in that cellar… Lumian contemplated briefly and reckoned that the ingredient storage cellar was usually bustling around noon. In theory, there shouldn’t be anything unusual or perilous.

After careful consideration, he decided to head to the cellar, listen at the door, and take a look. If he sensed anything awry, he would write to Madam Magician and inquire if he should heed Termiboros’s advice and enter.

Amidst the greetings of the chefs, kitchen helpers, handymen, and dishwashing maids, Lumian crossed through the kitchen and descended the stairs to the ingredient storage cellar.

The cellar’s dark-brown wooden door was securely shut, as usual.

Lumian strained his ears, intently listening for any signs of activity.

A faint chewing sound reached his ears.

It wasn’t a dramatic sound, devoid of the horrifying notion of a creature devouring flesh. Rather, it resembled a tramp gnawing on food after a long bout of hunger.

Something’s definitely amiss… Lumian cautiously pushed open the cellar door.

The light from the stairs seeped in, revealing a figure.

It was a boy of seven or eight, his back to Lumian. He had short yellow hair, a caramel coat, white stockings, and black strapless leather shoes. Behind him lay a dark red school bag that seemed somewhat weighty and sturdy.

Lumian found the attire oddly familiar.

Suddenly, he recalled where he’d seen it before.

Baron Brignais’s illegitimate son!

So, his disappearance led him to hiding in the ingredient cellar of Salle de Bal Brise? Lumian had intended to take a quick glance before shutting the door and leaving to pen a letter to Madam Magician at Auberge du Coq Doré. Yet, upon realizing that the person in the cellar was likely Baron Brignais’s illegitimate son, he furrowed his brow slightly and swung open the dark brown wooden door a bit more.

Additional light streamed in, causing the boy to instinctively turn and face the door.

Lumian caught sight of the brass buttons on his clothes, a black-and-white checkered shirt, and a linen coat. He saw a face with evident baby fat, unperturbed but vacant brown eyes, and a mouth smeared with blood.

The boy clutched a few raw steaks tinged with a dark red hue in his hand. His mouth kept opening and closing as he chewed on a vague mass of flesh resembling a rat. Its thin black tail gently swayed near his lips.

Lumian narrowed his eyes and slipped his left hand into his pocket.

The boy remained unperturbed, his gaze vacant as he continued staring at Lumian. He chewed a few more times before swallowing the bloody rat, tail and all.

Lumian arched an eyebrow and asked, "Are you Brignais's illegitimate son?"

"No," the boy mumbled, nibbling at a piece of raw steak.

"Then what's your connection?" Lumian queried in a "peaceful" manner.

After a while of eating raw steak, the boy answered, "He's my godfather and guardian in Trier."

Remarkably precise Intisian, hardly any accent… Lumian regarded the peculiar boy with puzzlement and probed, "Are you running away from home?"

"Yes," the boy replied, blood staining his mouth as he continued nibbling on the raw steak.

Behind him stretched a thick darkness, enveloped by the dim light from the corridor.

"Why did you flee from your godfather? Do you need me to help you return?" Lumian asked, offering a friendly smile, noticing that the other party was more amicable in conversation.

The boy shook his head vigorously.

"No! I don't want to go back to attending classes, studying, doing homework, taking practice tests, and sitting for exams!"

Wh— The boy's reasoning left Lumian oddly bewildered, as if he had glimpsed his own past.

He was intelligent and had no trouble attending classes, reading, or taking exams. He absorbed knowledge swiftly, but he disliked homework or practice tests. He relied on Aurore's "heartfelt education" to barely persevere. He often wished he could rope in Reimund, Ava, and his friends to do those tasks for him.

Is this rat-chewing enigma the fateful encounter Termiboros alluded to? Lumian pondered and inquired, "You don't seem to be from Intis?"

With an honest demeanor and a bloodied mouth, the boy responded, “I’m from Lenburg.”

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Chapter 311 - 311 Strange Boy

311 Strange Boy

Lenburg? Baron Brignais's illegitimate son or godchild resides in Lenburg? Lumian was puzzled, his mind racing with playful guesses.

Lumian studied the young lad before him and asked in a laid-back tone, "Aren't you supposed to be hitting the books in Lenburg at your age? The education there is leagues ahead of what Trier offers."

The boy's face lit up with an oddly animated expression. "Nah, I'm not up for the daily grind of school, burning the midnight oil over homework, and tackling exams every month!"

Sounds a little terrifying… A shiver trickled down Lumian's spine at the thought of such a life.

At the very least, it didn't sit right with him.

Agreeing with a nod, Lumian casually asked, "Are live rats tasty?"

The boy regained his composure. "It's not exactly gourmet, but I can't be choosy when hunger gnaws. Waiting till midday to raid the kitchen doesn't cut it. True bliss is savoring a meal whipped up by a maestro chef. And some mild hunger pangs do add a certain… flair."

After explaining, he must have felt he came across too mature and quickly recalibrated.

"Can't blame me if your kitchen's dragging its feet until noon!"

Well, that's hardly the point, now, is it? When I was wandering about without a proper place to stay, I sure as heck didn't have any notions of munching on live rats. The big issue, of course, was that I couldn't even catch the pesky things. And if by some miracle I did, then I had to somehow figure out how to set up a fire, skin them, and roast them. But this kid right here? He's out here grabbing rats, using nothing but his own bare hands. His strength or maybe just his good luck isn't half bad, I'll give him that. It's not even an hour away from noon, and he's acting like he's got an insatiable hunger? The more Lumian looked at him, the more he was convinced there was something peculiar about this little lad.

Amused, he inquired, "Brignais didn't bother to feed you, then? Need me to escort you to the police headquarters so you can lodge a complaint about his child abuse?"

“Well, aside from pestering me about my studies, he’s alright. He makes sure I have a proper meal every two hours. On top of that, he whips up cakes, biscuits, roasted meat, and pies for those midnight hunger pangs.” A subtle lick of the lips revealed the boy’s longing.

Are you a pig? Lumian had never eaten so much while undergoing puberty.

And yet, the lad didn’t appear overweight, only solidly built.

In the blink of an eye, the boy’s gaze shifted as he spoke in rapid succession, “Perhaps studying demands a lot of energy. I need all this sustenance to keep my brain firing on all cylinders.”

Is there no saying about how “trying to explain is just a cover-up” in Lenburg’s education? Your elaborate justification makes me wonder if your appetite is problematic… All this eating hasn’t exactly made you a genius, has it? Lumian grinned and quipped, “If Brignais wasn’t intentionally starving you, why resort to raw rats and steak?”

In a frustrated tone, the boy retorted, “I managed to slip away without breakfast or morning tea today!”

And yet, you’re so famished that you’re downing raw rats? If you go hungry for another half day or so, will you start eying pedestrians on the street? With a fluid motion, Lumian produced an iron-gray military flask from his shirt pocket.

His left hand slid into his trouser pocket, deftly unscrewing the cap of the flask before tucking it away.

Lumian raised the iron-gray metal flask, breathing in the fragrance with a satisfied grin. He inquired, his voice light, “Fancy a sip?”

Gulp! The boy’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed his saliva.

He’s tasted it before, and he’s taken a liking to it… Lumian passed his judgment and swallowed a mouthful of the spirit.

“Why’re you asking?” the boy inquired cautiously.

Seeing the lack of alarm, Lumian breathed a sigh of relief. He tipped the flask again, the liquid gurgling.

He lowered the military flask, his expression bright as he spoke with clarity, “As a devout follower of the God of Steam and Machinery, I’ve got to verify the faith of those with uncertain origins.”

“By steam!”

This time, Lumian spoke without the veil of alcohol.

Subconsciously, the boy shook his head.

“Words don’t mean much. Just saying I believe in whichever deity doesn’t make it true.”

Lumian studied the boy’s reaction. “It’s true that folks from the orthodox Churches can sometimes claim belief in any deity without much sincerity, but they’re harmless. I’m more concerned about worshipers of evil gods. They’re fervent and unpredictable. They won’t fake it to deceive others, believing that to be against their faith and blasphemous.”

Instinctively, the boy retorted, “Not always. Some followers of evil gods will pose as adherents of the orthodox gods to further their holy missions. They can pray, attend rituals, join Mass, and chant the names of other gods without a second thought—as long as they repent to their own deity afterward, they reckon there’s no issue…”

At that moment, the young lad abruptly halted. He exchanged gazes with Lumian and lapsed into a prolonged silence.

After a spell, he took a bite out of his uncooked steak and introduced himself, “I’m a believer of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. The devoted faithful in our Church have this peculiar knack for pointing out slip-ups in the other party’s speech, just like before. Yep, just like before!”

Lumian fixed a piercing gaze on the lad for a few beats before inquiring, “What might be the usual prayers at the God of Knowledge and Wisdom Church?”

Quick as a flash, the boy responded, “Like I was saying earlier, folks who believe in those evil gods can mutter the honorific name of an orthodox god with a heavy heart and toss out those prayers. You can’t rightly figure out what’s in others’ minds unless you’re a card-carrying member of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church and you’ve got it notarized that you won’t lie…”

With that, the lad clammed up once more, his gaze fixed vacantly on Lumian.

After a brief pause, he stretched out his empty right hand, and pressed it to his forehead. “May wisdom be with you!”

Such a foolish fellow shouldn’t be a spy sent by an evil god… From his intelligence, he’s really a child… Lumian struggled to maintain his composure, requiring a concealed deep breath to regain control over his facial muscles.

“Indeed,” he concurred, his lips curving into a smile. Mirroring the boy’s action, he brushed his head with the base of the iron-gray military flask and uttered with significance, “May wisdom be with you!”

Without affording the boy a chance to reply, Lumian adopted an alluring tone. “Would you care to join me at the café on the second floor? I’ll treat you to a proper meal. The chefs here are quite remarkable.”

The boy swallowed visibly. “You won’t turn against me, will you?”

“You can tail me the entire time. That way, I won’t ever get a shot at double-crossing you.” Lumian initiated a little trial, testing if the other guy’s brains matched his looks and age, or maybe they lagged behind. “And mind you, we only prohibit the God of Knowledge and Wisdom Church from preaching in Intis or setting up a cathedral. We do let their believers cross the border. Trier’s got the Lenburg Chamber of Commerce, you see.”

The boy pondered for a moment and said, “Okay.”

Lumian sized him up, withdrew his left hand, sealed the liquor flask, and tucked the iron-gray flask back in his brown coat.

With that, Lumian pivoted and ascended the stairs.

The kid stuck to him, politely shutting the cellar’s deep-brown door behind him.

Seeing Lumian whirl around, the kid explained earnestly, “If it’s left open, the food inside will spoil.”

“True enough.” Lumian pulled his gaze and climbed up the stairs.

The kid trailed him close, eyes peeled for any odd moves, any signs of betrayal.

Lumian steered him into the kitchen, then upstairs to the café on the second floor and ordered a set meal.

In no time, the spread hit the table: fried veal steak, grilled eel, roasted leg of lamb, chicken pie, red wine, and cream.

Lumian settled in, watching the kid wolfing down like he was bottomless.

Every now and then, he tossed a comment,

“Veal is crisped good, but the meat is nothing special…

“Sweet sauce masks the eel’s fishiness, but it makes it greasy…

“Leg of lamb is roasted just right, crispy outside, tender inside. Spices are off a touch, though. Too much fennel…

“…”

Just eat. Why are you so talkative… Lumian silently watched the boy eat the table full of food with a satisfied expression.

Fifteen minutes later, Baron Brignais walked in from the second-floor entrance, donning a half top hat with a diamond ring shining.

The boy turned in surprise and glanced back at Lumian.

Lumian smiled and said, “Did you think I’m the only one here who knows you?”

The boy was startled as he fell silent.

Baron Brignais walked up to Lumian and said with unconcealed relaxation, “Appreciate it, Ciel.”

“Just so happened to catch him skulking around in the cellar, munching on something,” Lumian responded, his voice warm and friendly.

Baron Brignais gave him a sidelong glance before shifting his attention to the boy. “Time to head back, Ludwig.”

Ludwig, the young boy, remained silent. Swiftly, he polished off the last remnants of his meal and rose from his seat.

“Ciel, we’ll catch up,” Baron Brignais directed a nod at Lumian.

Seated opposite, Lumian observed as Baron Brignais clasped Ludwig’s hand, their departure imminent. Lumian’s lips curved again before saying, “Don’t forget to settle the tab.”

Baron Brignais displayed a hint of surprise. His eyes flickered, suggesting a momentary uncertainty in his initial assessment.

Yet without uttering a word, he withdrew a wallet brimming with banknotes and promptly covered the cost of Ludwig’s meal.

Lumian maintained a contemplative silence, watching the duo disappear down the stairwell. Leaning back in his chair, he murmured softly, his voice a mere whisper, “Temiboros, where exactly is the stroke of fate you mentioned?”

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Chapter 312 - 312 Hint

312 Hint

Though Lumian maintained a cautious skepticism toward Termiboros, his curiosity about the enigmatic “stroke of fate” continued to gnaw at him.

The way Termiboros had alluded to the Earth Blood ore as an “encounter” had caught his attention. Could this time involve Ludwig, the young boy?

There was something off about this fellow, something amiss. Yet, as their conversation unfolded, Lumian came to acknowledge Ludwig’s intelligence, origins, and apparent devotion to the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. Despite this interaction, Lumian found himself gaining no true insights or foresight. It was unlike his understanding of the Earth Blood ore’s potential, which hinged on specific conditions of going underground, finding the right area to encounter something.

Once again, Termiboros’s powerful voice reverberated through Lumian.

“The moment will reveal itself.”

“Can’t you people make yourself clear?” Lumian’s frustration surged, his blood boiling in his veins..

“I’m unlike what you consider people,” Termiboros responded, straightforwardly. “I’m a Mythical Creature.”

“…” Lumian was left speechless, taken aback. He forced a scoff and retorted, “I doubt even your sealed form can truly grasp fate’s threads. Each time, your answers are mired in vagueness. What sets you apart from amateurs in the Divination Club? If you possess the power, reveal clearly where my next opportunity lies!”

Termiboros responded with a deep tone, “Tonight, at 11 p.m., Rist Docks, Warehouse 3.”

Huh? Surprise coursed through Lumian; Termiboros’s hint was unexpected.

Yet, within his astonishment, puzzlement persisted.

Inevitability’s angel is that kind?

As a high-ranking Alms Monk, He shouldn’t have been provoked so easily to interpret my fate…

Could there be an ulterior motive?

Regardless, I'll consult Madam Magician's insight first.

Lumian decided swiftly. He rose, departed Salle de Bal Brise, and embarked on a journey to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Executing a simple act of arson, he could initiate the initial potion digestion step and contemplate gaining a Contractee boon. Despite his anxiety, Lumian refused to lower his guard against Termiboros.

Within Rue des Blouses Blanches, in the safe house.

Lumian meticulously documented the particulars regarding Ludwig and Termiboros's clue. Subsequently, he conducted a ritual, summoning the doll-like messenger.

As Lumian awaited Madam Magician's response, he delved into a trove of information concerning spirit world creatures. Reading the descriptions of certain knowledge consumed a substantial amount of his spirituality. Some even induced dizziness, nausea, frustration, headache, a burning sensation, and illusions.

Similar to Aurore's grimoires' portrayal of profound knowledge about deities and high-level creatures, this information is fraught with intense corruption and perilous ramifications. If all the knowledge that pursues humans bear such attributes, it's genuinely chilling. The prospect of losing oneself upon hearing it or succumbing to immediate demise is unsettling… Thus, Lumian punctuated his reading to safeguard his mental well-being from plummeting to precarious thresholds.

After poring through descriptions of approximately 30 to 40 spirit world creatures, Lumian stumbled upon a figure he recognized.

"Rabbit of Knowledge:

"Weak spirit world creature, friendly to humans and possesses an innate thirst for knowledge. Their summons are rarely declined.

"Diverse experiences yield distinct Rabbits of Knowledge. Shared traits include mastery of various languages, spoken and written communication skills, and adept reading capabilities. Extracting salient information from extensive knowledge is their forte, and their transcription speed outpaces even mechanical typewriters.

"Drawback: Limited communication finesse and inflexible thinking. Some Rabbits of Knowledge have been tainted by anomalous knowledge, evolving into significant hazards. To summon, restrict choices to the friendly and weak."

So, it goes by the name "Rabbit of Knowledge." Summoning this entity in the future should be more targeted… Yet, its abilities and attributes are of limited value. If I had gone as per Aurore's vision of university enrollment, I would

benefit from its multilingual proficiency and strong reading skills… Noteworthy, the text omits mention of its speed within the spirit realm, implying its negligible worth in that aspect. It moves sluggishly, drains spirituality… Lumian lowered the document, massaged his temples, and embarked on his third respite.

During this juncture, the messenger bore Madam Magician's response:

"I share curiosity regarding what encounter the lad named Ludwig would bring. His appearance in Trier intrigues me; motivations remain nebulous.

"Vigilance is prudent. His existence carries intrigue.

"Proceed. The window of acting presents itself to me as well."

Can't you people make things clear… Lumian's lips twitched, absorbing the succinct message.

However, a nuanced sense emerged that Madam Magician's opening sentence wasn't an immediate response. It resonated more as a condensed echo of her contemplations.

In essence, Madam Magician, imbued with her astromancy prowess, struggled to glean Ludwig's fate. Her perceptions seemed clouded, suggesting she only harbored conjectures.

The obscurity surrounding Ludwig's destiny, evident in her inability to perceive it, spoke volumes.

…

At 10:50 p.m., at Rist Docks, outside Warehouse 3.

Lumian took cover in the shadows, poised to seize the much-anticipated opening for action.

Soon enough, two silhouettes approached Warehouse 3, drawing within a mere five to six meters of Lumian.

One of them spoke hushedly, riddled with concern, "Héctor, the accountants arrive tomorrow for an audit. How do we address this? Shall I hire a thief to pilfer the account records?"

"What purpose would that serve? The moment they inspect the warehouse, suspicion will arise. Our remaining stock barely equals a tenth of the required amount." Héctor's tone escalated, simmering with intensity. "If we're to proceed, we ought to do so comprehensively by reducing the warehouse to ashes. This way, any discrepancies would remain concealed."

I see… Listening closely, Lumian deduced his cue to act.

As his companion wavered, Héctor interjected, “Fires are commonplace in Trier, normalized in everyone’s mind. Moreover, igniting them ourselves isn’t necessary. The market district swarms with miscreants and rogues. Once the time is ripe, we can entice them to vacate Trier with a handsome fee.

“Honoré, we can’t wait any longer. You must decide now.”

Honoré paused, then spoke resolutely, “Agreed! We’ll locate Guy and recruit him into our plan!”

The duo conducted a swift survey of the warehouse’s surroundings before departing for the docks, en route to rendezvous with their comrade, Guy.

After a brief trek, the sky abruptly reddened, casting an incandescent hue across the scene. Simultaneously, the crackle of flames resounded.

Honoré and Héctor instinctively spun around, bearing witness to an inferno emerging. Vermilion flames surged, fierce and ravenous, soaring to engulf the structure.

“Fire, fire…” Héctor mumbled, a glint of realization dawning. “Indeed, fire! Praise the Sun, it’s a fire!”

Honoré exhibited a similar reaction, his right hand tracing a triangular Sacred Emblem over his chest, lips moving in muted invocation.

Yet, within the momentary elation, disquiet brewed within Honoré’s senses.

Trepidation tinted his voice as he discerned, “The warehouse isn’t aflame. It’s our office!”

Positioned meters away from the warehouse was their office—a modest gray two-story edifice.

The expanse separating it from the warehouse remained empty, devoid of combustible material.

“…” Héctor’s visage contorted in terror. Clenching his jaw, he spoke with grim resolve, “We must set fire to the warehouse now!”

Even as the words left his lips, an explosion erupted from the locus of crimson flames.

Though not seismic, the detonation garnered the attention of dock workers and firefighters.

“Fire! Fire!” The clamor resounded as responders converged. In Trier, a city renowned for frequent conflagrations, firefighters were seasoned in addressing such crises.

Observing the scene, Héctor and Honoré, who hadn't reached Warehouse 3, slumped onto the roadside, their vigor sapped.

At the entrance of the dock.

Albus, his hair now a fiery hue, averted his gaze from the raging blaze to the middle-aged man at his side.

"Monsieur Guy, your colleague seems even more agitated than you."

Guy's complexion paled as he shook his head in bewilderment.

"The warehouse wasn't the target of the fire…"

A pause lingered before Albus sneered.

"I warned you already. Hesitation begets mishaps. Now, ponder your escape. May you be more decisive this time."

Beside the unassuming two-story structure, Lumian gazed upon the soaring flames. The timber and flammable materials metamorphosed into an ephemeral dragon, casting his countenance in fiery red, eyes alight with fervor.

With a grin, he advanced toward the blaze.

The duo's intent to commit arson entailed erasing incriminating evidence by reducing the warehouse to ashes. However, Lumian's purpose was to generate turmoil, inviting scrutiny that would unearth the discrepancies within the warehouse!

Such was the duty of a responsible citizen.

A mantle of flames enveloped Lumian, adhering to his attire obediently—merely a hair's breadth from ignition.

Donning the flaming cloak, Lumian marched into the roaring blaze.

Fire coalesced with fire, repelling smoke. Effortlessly traversing the structure, Lumian exited on the opposite end of the dock.

Following the arson, Lumian acquired a rudimentary mastery over the potion's powers. He tamed it, dispelling the burning sensation on his skin and the trepidation in his heart.

While his potion digestion remained incomplete, Lumian had already adapted to his present state, giving him the capacity to receive an additional Inevitability boon.

…

After carrying out a few rounds of anti-tracking, Lumian returned to the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Initiating the initial step of digesting the Pyromaniac potion prior to tracking down the padre filled him with satisfaction. He maintained a smile, yet his demeanor faltered upon glimpsing the towering pile of dense information within the iron cabinet.

It would take at least a month or two to finish reading them!

How could he identify an apt contracted creature in so brief a span?

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Chapter 313 - 313 Plans with Different Styles

313 Plans with Different Styles

Lumian stood before the iron cabinet, his mind immersed in contemplation.

With just a handful of days remaining until the date designated by the Prophecy Spell, Lumian earnestly aspired to secure Contractee status, thereby attaining three distinctive abilities. This enhancement was imperative prior to pursuing Guillaume Bénet. The augmentation would tip the odds in his favor.

Relying solely on Pyromaniac, even in collaboration with Franca, now a Demoness of Pleasure, and the support of Anthony Reid and Jenna, prevailing against the padre's uncanny abilities remained tenuous. Victory might be attainable, but apprehending the adversary without incurring losses was a near-impossible endeavor—except if he enlisted the assistance of the Aurora Order Oracle via Mr. K's finger.

This assessment solely considered Guillaume Bénet as Lumian's adversary. If the padre had other confederates, alongside a cohort of bestowers or Beyonders, and if he had grown mightier than his state upon departing Cordu, Lumian's undertaking wouldn't assure triumph—even with Mr. K.

Lumian's aspiration was to pinpoint the padre's whereabouts and engineer a snare, drawing him out. Such an approach would markedly simplify the process. Nevertheless, Lumian needed to bolster his strength substantially. Otherwise, the "fishing" operation would entail dire jeopardy.

As Lumian perused the stack of dense information concerning spirit world entities, his mind whirled, seeking avenues to locate a suitable contract partner within a constrained timeframe.

Should I designate a time frame for reading and strive to cover as much ground as feasible? Then, my selection must derive from my existing familiarity?

This proposition falls short of my expectations. It risks bypassing the most fitting opportunity…

Although the circumstances aren't optimal, I must reconcile with reality. Perfection remains elusive; I must confront my own limitations head-on.

Son of a sow, it hasn't reached a juncture necessitating blind acceptance!

For now, I'll withhold any definitive moves until I ascertain the padre's whereabouts next week. I'll bide my time. Following the completion of this information assimilation, a comprehensive strategy will crystallize, right?

It will take approximately a month. The potential for accidents looms large…

Uh, the Rabbit of Knowledge appears to have the ability to read and extract key points. Can I summon one to help me read the information and extract the keywords of every spirit world creature, like when I whistleblowed? Then, I'll carefully study the corresponding spirit world creatures based on the keywords…

It's a creature of the spirit world to begin with. Having come into contact with such knowledge, it will definitely be less affected than me and can last longer…

Lumian gradually grew excited. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that it was feasible to ask the Rabbit of Knowledge to help him do the reading and write a brief summary.

He swiftly perfected the corresponding plan.

That rabbit is quite stupid and silly. I have to design a table in advance and list the 'page number', 'strength', 'whether it's friendly', 'brief description of abilities', and 'points of characteristics'. I'll let it fill in the columns in step and order.

Unfortunately, a person can only summon one Rabbit of Knowledge at a time. Otherwise, if I had ten or twenty, I will be able to complete the summary on spirit world creatures before dawn…

If one person can only summon one, what about having more than one person?

I can have Franca, Jenna, and Anthony Reid summon one each for me!

Uh… Rabbits can read quickly, extract essential points, and fill out summaries. Humans can do the same. Franca, Jenna, and Anthony can help browse through the information and quickly extract keywords from the columns.

I'll contribute knowledge, and they contribute labor, spirituality, and time!

Lumian's eyes grew brighter and brighter. He felt that if he pushed this plan forward, even with frequent breaks to mentally recover and the time to summon a Rabbit of Knowledge again, he should be able to produce a summary on the spirit world creatures in twelve hours.

When the time came, he would browse through the summaries that wouldn't affect his mind and select 20 to 30 suitable ones. He would read the raw information in a targeted fashion and make a final decision.

The only problem now was that the information on these spirit world creatures had been provided by Madam Magician; Lumian hadn't exchanged it using contributions or money. He believed that before "sharing" with others, he had to

obtain the approval of the Major Arcana card holder.

This was basic respect.

Lumian sprang into action without hesitation. Swiftly, he composed a letter outlining his inquiry and the comprehensive plan he had crafted.

Soon, Madam Magician responded: “For a moment, I don’t know what to say about your idea. It appears you possess an aptitude for such considerations.

“Sharing your knowledge with your friends is permissible, but remember to advise them against engaging with powerful or perilous spirit world creatures. These entities hold no sway over you, thanks to Mr. Fool’s seal. It serves as a deterrent in the spirit world, offering you a measure of protection that others lack.”

“Actually, there are simpler and easier ways:

“Take the information to Two of Cups and spread it in every corner of the room. Then, get Two of Cups to recite the divination statement repeatedly and throw out three tarot cards or three coins.

“Choose whichever spirit world creature they land on. Even if it’s not the most suitable for you, it’s relatively suitable. It might be useful in a future occasion.”

Hiss, what a brilliant charlatan! Madam Magician is indeed skilled in divination. Her style is completely different from mine… Lumian hadn’t considered divination.

After careful consideration, he decided to follow his plan. The answer chosen through divination always felt unreliable and unreal. He subconsciously didn’t want to rely on it.

By relying on his own intelligence and abilities to filter them out, he would feel more confident and convinced.

Unless there was no other way, Lumian hoped to finish “reading” the information before making a choice.

He burned Madam Magician’s reply and carefully wrote up the form. For the time being, he only made five copies.

Immediately after, he set up the altar to see if he could accurately summon the Rabbit of Knowledge.

To this end, the summoning incantation he had devised was: “Rabbit-shaped spirit wandering in the void, a friendly creature that can be communicated with, a weakling who pursues knowledge.”

The choice to avoid using the human-coined “Rabbit of Knowledge” as its name spoke of Lumian’s respect for the enigmatic nature of these creatures.

Having carefully considered his approach, Lumian ignited a solitary candle and made a summoning in his own name.

His incantation concluded, and the candle's flame transformed into a deep shade of green, expanding to resemble a human head in size.

From within the luminous green flame, a translucent creature emerged, its appearance reminiscent of an amusingly awkward rabbit.

Relief washed over Lumian as the ritual proved successful. The creature's presence signaled a triumph, and Lumian's experienced voice addressed it, "I wish to share knowledge with you, seeking your assistance in distilling key points and completing a form."

The rabbit's eyes brightened, and in a tone that mimicked Lumian's voice and Trier's Intisian accent, it inquired, "Where is the knowledge?"

This was the first time Lumian had heard such a creature speak. He didn't expect it to imitate his tone and pronunciation.

With purpose, Lumian retrieved a stack of information about spirit world creatures he had yet to delve into. He gestured towards the form on the table, articulating the task's parameters in a manner befitting a creature of limited intellect.

The rabbit absorbed Lumian's guidance, its long ears drooping as it committed the instructions to memory. Eventually, it nodded in comprehension.

Seated at Lumian's desk, the rabbit's eyes sparkled as it engaged with the information.

Lumian noted with satisfaction that, despite its unwilling nature, the rabbit demonstrated proficiency in its repetitive task. It diligently extracted pertinent details and methodically filled out the form with words like "powerful" and "dangerous."

Although it's not very smart, doing such repetitive work isn't a problem for it… It's at least twice as fast as my reading… Lumian nodded in satisfaction and lay on the bed, preparing to close his eyes and rest while the Rabbit of Knowledge was busy working to alleviate his fatigue.

After an unknown period of time, he suddenly sensed danger and hurriedly sat up.

He saw that the transparent rabbit had grown to two meters tall, constantly flipping through the information and extracting.

"Stop!" Lumian didn't understand what was happening and instinctively stopped the other party from coming into contact with the knowledge.

The rabbit turned its head, its eyes bloodshot.

After staring at Lumian for a few seconds, it reluctantly halted its work.

Lumian's introspection led him to deduce the cause behind this transformation.

As a creature of the spirit world, the Rabbit of Knowledge was similarly affected by that knowledge, albeit to a relatively mild extent. However, it wasn't like ordinary humans due to its lacking intelligence. It didn't know to stop and rest after an abnormality unless it directly endangered its life.

As it accumulated, it inevitably underwent a certain mutation.

Phew, it's useful—that's true, but not having much intelligence is a huge problem… Lumian ended the summoning and allowed the Rabbit of Knowledge to return to the spirit world and slowly recover.

He washed up briefly, lay on the bed, and prepared to rest.

An idea surfaced just before sleep claimed him. Lumian summoned the rabbit once more and directed it to replicate a hundred copies of the form he had devised.

Only then did he truly relax and fall asleep.

…

The following morning, Lumian was brimming with vigor as he set off for Rue Anarchie. His first stop was to locate Anthony Reid, the information broker, and discuss the potential of his assistance.

As he approached Auberge du Coq Doré, a figure emerged from a nearby side alley.

It was Baron Brignais, adorned in a half top hat and a formal black suit, mahogany-colored pipe in hand.

"I promised to catch up with you and express my gratitude for aiding me in finding Ludwig," Baron Brignais began with a smile. "It's quite surprising to find you neither at Salle de Bal Brise nor Auberge du Coq Doré."

Gratitude? Then help me read and write a summary! Lumian muttered subconsciously before swiftly dismissing the notion.

Compared to Anthony Reid, an information broker with a mental illness, Baron Brignais was not only a member of the Savoie Mob, but his background also seemed problematic. It was best not to let him discover that his relationship with Franca didn't rely solely on Jenna.

A smile tugged at Lumian's lips.

"The night offers its own beauty. It's pointless to remain confined within one's room. How do you intend to express your gratitude?"

Rather than providing a direct answer, Baron Brignais diverted the conversation. “I may not have mentioned this earlier, but I converted to the worship of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom a few years back.”

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Chapter 314 - 314 Crowd-Sourcing

314 Crowd-Sourcing

Did you communicate with your godson and come to me to confirm the situation? Lumian maintained his smile.

“What you believe has no bearing on me, as long as you don’t subscribe to an evil god. Furthermore, devotees of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom are not wanted criminals in Trier.”

His implication was clear: “I’m still a wanted criminal. Believe what you will.”

Baron Brignais had always been astute. He changed the subject and continued, “Thank you for aiding me in locating Ludwig. I’m unsure how to adequately express my gratitude.”

He refrained from specifying a thank-you gift, hoping to gauge Lumian’s stance and thoughts.

Lumian pondered briefly before recalling the idea he had set aside.

Getting Baron Brignais to assist with reading and summarizing didn’t necessitate his presence alongside Franca, Jenna, and Anthony Reid. He could impart some information, clarify what he needed to focus on, and allow him to return home to peruse and transcribe.

Likewise, before Anthony Reid committed to joining the pursuit of Padre Guillaume Bénet, direct contact with Jenna and Franca couldn’t be allowed. An isolated “office” could be arranged for him at a later time.

Lumian glanced at Baron Brignais and inquired deliberately, “Are you proficient in reading and drafting notes?”

Aurore’s grimoires had denoted that the pathway under the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom was labeled Reader. This was also the title of Sequence 9 potion. Sequence 8 was Student of Ratiocination, and Sequence 7 was Detective.

Given Baron Brignais rarely exhibited special abilities and mostly leveraged his exceptional intellect, above-average combat skills, and sharp marksmanship to lead the Savoie Mob, coupled with his present faith, Lumian speculated he was a Beyonder of the Reader path.

From the potion’s nomenclature alone, one could infer such an individual excelled in reading.

Baron Brignais drew from his pipe and responded, “In contrast to the illiterate, my reading and learning aptitude is rather commendable.”

He couldn’t entirely fathom Ciel’s intentions, yet he suspected Ciel was prying into his Beyonder pathway.

And it wasn’t confidential. Gardner Martin had long been privy to this.

Lumian unveiled a genuine smile.

“Of late, I’ve acquired a trove of information concerning creatures from the spirit world. However, as you’re aware—you should be aware, correct? Delving into such knowledge extensively exerts a significant toll on the mind. As a Beyonder of the Hunter path, I shan’t require this information for an extended period. Nevertheless, I wish to have access to the pertinent knowledge when necessity arises, without squandering precious time. Therefore, I intend to furnish you with a portion of the data. Kindly assist me in reading and extracting the key terms.”

“Much akin to constructing an index for a library.” Baron Brignais promptly grasped.

He grinned and remarked, “Truthfully, this would prove advantageous to me. That knowledge holds considerable value.”

Library index… As anticipated of an adherent of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom. How professional… Lumian rejoiced, sensing Baron Brignais was roughly on par with Anthony Reid combined with a Rabbit of Knowledge.

Simultaneously, he harbored a cautious sentiment toward Baron Brignais. For instance, he would furnish this God of Knowledge and Wisdom follower with ten pages of information. He would peruse them in advance and jot down notes. Subsequently, he would cross-reference them with the index submitted by Baron Brignais to discern any deliberate omissions or alterations.

Of course, this was Lumian’s unrefined approach. He could alternatively beseech Franca to verify via divination, but the potential for interference still existed.

Lumian slid his hands into his pockets and surveyed Baron Brignais, akin to an artisan observing a laborer. He beamed and uttered, “I’m indifferent to who benefits, as long as I accomplish my objective.”

Baron Brignais nodded faintly, refraining from further commentary. He solely apprised Lumian of his whereabouts the following morning and requested the information to be conveyed there.

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 305.

Facing Anthony Reid, Lumian eased back and reiterated his words to Baron Brignais. Concluding, he voiced, “This knowledge serves as your compensation. Furthermore, I shall impart to you the knowledge of ritualistic magic. You’ll be

able to summon a unique spirit world creature to peruse the information alongside you and distill the essential points. How does that proposition strike you? Are you inclined to accept this assignment?"

Anthony Reid's deep brown eyes mirrored Lumian's form as he contemplated and responded, "You're pressed for time. This matter bears added weight for you. It carries great significance."

Lumian had no intention of concealing this. He seized the opportunity and conveyed, "I'm confronted with the need to face a formidable adversary soon, and I seek to secure a fitting contracted creature. When the moment arrives, I might extend you an invitation, primarily in a supportive role. You can consider whether to agree and what form of compensation you desire. Heh heh, there's no rush for an answer. Think over it for the next two days."

"You're paving the way for me to be mentally prepared and foster appropriate expectations." Anthony Reid deciphered Lumian's thoughts.

Instantly, Lumian felt a twinge of embarrassment, but he was never one to blush easily. He maintained a composed smile and articulated, "Can you not tell that being honest will put your life in danger?"

Anthony Reid offered a slight nod, affirming certain aspects prior to committing to aid in perusing the information and crafting the "summary."

…

On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, in the room adjacent to Lumian's quarters.

Lumian surveyed Anthony Reid and the Rabbit of Knowledge, seated in tandem, diligently sifting through the information and completing forms. He subtly nodded in relief.

Once more, he reiterated the caution not to delve deeply into the spirit world creature knowledge marked as "powerful" and "dangerous." Exiting the room, he entered the office at the corridor's end.

Franca cozied up in Lumian's armchair, her red-booted feet propped on the desk's edge.

Baffled and intrigued, she inquired, "What exactly do you need our help with? Why are you being so mysterious?"

Jenna settled into the chair across from her, turning her body as her gaze drifted to the door.

Lumian nonchalantly shut the door and recounted the scenario, elucidating his need to secure a contracted creature prior to confronting the padre.

“Wouldn’t a simple divination suffice?” Franca pondered as she acquiesced to Lumian’s entreaty, while Jenna simmered with curiosity about the spirit world creatures.

Before long, Franca gazed up at the trio of Rabbits of Knowledge and Jenna, as well as Lumian, each absorbed in their respective tasks of poring over documents. Amusement laced her voice as she quipped, “Why does this feel like a miniature workshop, and we’re the toiling transcribers?”

Congratulations, your instincts are on point… Lumian retorted in jest, “Am I not also perusing the information and completing forms?”

Franca mulled it over and conceded. She resumed her “labors.”

And so, they persisted until well past 10 p.m., punctuating their efforts with numerous breaks—meals, siestas, catnaps—to mitigate the strain. Brief reprieves preceded the summoning of the Rabbits of Knowledge once more.

Intermittently, during his short intervals, Lumian observed Franca, Jenna, Anthony Reid, and the quartet of Rabbits of Knowledge. He remained vigilant to prevent them from becoming too engrossed and to detect any anomalies they might experience.

Jenna reached her threshold first. Having newly ascended to Instigator, she hadn’t fully acclimated to the potion’s effects and was grappling with containing the surge of power. Her state was less than optimal.

Anthony Reid followed suit. His psychological scars ran deep, rendering him susceptible to certain deviations.

Lumian, Franca, and the seventh set of Rabbits of Knowledge soldiered on till the end.

Baron Brignais concluded his task around 6 p.m. and delivered the documents and forms to the café.

After dismissing the summons and seeing off the fatigued “assistants,” Lumian returned to the safehouse on Rue des Blouses Blanches, arranging the forms in a neat stack.

Perusing the papers briefly, he confirmed the general state of affairs. A sense of accomplishment swelled within him as he casually tossed the forms onto the table.

The immediate selection wasn’t on his agenda. His plan was to first establish a Contractee status and sort out the specifics of the contract. Only afterward would he consult the index, thereby preventing the likelihood of stumbling upon a spirit world creature that matched his criteria in all respects but failed to meet the contract stipulations.

Lumian rested for a spell before summoning a Rabbit of Knowledge and tasking it with duplicating two more forms.

Storing the three indices separately, Lumian's weariness was palpable. The prospect of cleansing himself seemed distant as he tumbled onto the bed and surrendered to sleep.

…

At 6 a.m., Lumian brimmed with vigor, showing no haste to descend underground, arrange an altar, and beseech for a boon. Instead, he engaged in his usual regimen: jogging, practicing boxing, and cultivating his mental equilibrium.

By nearly 8 a.m., he stood before the doorway to Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, ingredients at the ready.

After a brief internal debate, Lumian ultimately seized the carbide lamp—although he no longer required specialized illumination equipment; he was, in essence, a paragon of such abilities.

His aspiration rested on his foes' initial assumption that he lacked night vision and was inept at generating light.

In Underground Trier, within the quarry cavern that had once borne witness to Inevitability-linked rituals on several occasions.

Lumian briefly tidied the dank, lightless setting, positioning a blood-infused candle upon the altar stone.

Just as he concluded the sanctification of the ritual silver dagger and readied to cast a spiritual barrier, faint footfalls reached his ears.

The sounds reverberated within the subterranean passage, seemingly not distant from the present mine.

Someone is passing by? Lumian's pulse quickened, his intent fixated on swiftly restoring the area to order and concealing himself.

Yet, as he neared the altar before him and before he could extinguish the carbide lamp, soft footsteps drew close, manifesting at the cave entrance.

Aware that concealment was futile, Lumian promptly swiveled around, one hand nestled in his pocket, his gaze converging on the source of the sound.

A slender man of brownish-black complexion stood there, clutching a carbide lamp. His black hair bore a slight curl, and his eyes held a profound allure. He sported a black seer's cloak reminiscent of those seen in a circus.

Monette… Lumian recognized the figure.

He was an Islander swindler who had duped Charlie and been hoodwinked by the con artists in Salle de Bal Unique.

Monette, too, saw Lumian.

A smirk tugged at the corners of his lips as he greeted with palpable cheer, “What a coincidence.”

In tandem with his words, the swindler produced a crystalline monocle, inserting it into his right eye socket.

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Chapter 315 - 315 Anxious Termiboros

315 Anxious Termiboros

What a coincidence? Lumian knew better than to consider it mere coincidence.

This wasn't like the time he had rescued Jenna—Lumian had doggedly followed the trail.

Monette's presence, monocle affixed, roused Lumian's caution. He mustered a semblance of a smile and replied, "Indeed. What a coincidence."

With one hand casually slipped into his pocket, Lumian played his role, pretending to secure the candles and materials on the stone surface. The intention was to convey that the ritual was complete and he could depart whenever he pleased. There was nothing of value to plunder or destroy.

Monette adjusted his monocle and with a wave of his hand, offered a departing smile.

"See you aboveground."

And just like that, he withdrew, his footsteps fading into the depths.

Lumian was caught off guard.

He's leaving just like that?

Could it really have been a coincidence?

Judging from Monette's familiarity with Underground Trier, it is evident he has traversed these passages countless times. Yet, that level of familiarity should have taught him that barging into a well-lit spot amidst the darkness could easily trigger conflict…

Common sense dictates that a stranger's presence in the quarry cave warrants cautious observation for any approach. The abrupt, nonchalant "appearance" seemed off…

Does he truly possess that much confidence in his prowess?

It can't be just to scare me!

As Lumian's thoughts raced, he shifted his gaze from the cave entrance to the candles and materials neatly arranged on the rocks.

The question arose whether to persist with the boon ritual.

In that instant, the voice of Termiboros reverberated within him: “You’d best relocate.”

Uh… Lumian’s senses tingled, catching a note of unease in Termiboros’s tone.

It was subtle, almost elusive, making Lumian doubt his judgment.

This was the first time Lumian had perceived emotional fluctuations in this Inevitability angel.

In previous interactions, no matter how much Lumian goaded and prodded, Termiboros merely maintained silence.

As his heart quickened, Lumian blurted out, “Is this person truly dangerous?”

This confirmed Lumian’s guess.

The angel had sensed a looming problem through the strings of fate, a predicament that could jeopardize His very essence.

“Why does a seemingly less formidable individual trigger such unease? What’s his motive?” Lumian pressed on.

Termiboros reverted to His usual depth as He intoned, “I’m sealed. I can only perceive the outside world through you, so I lack ample information. To uncover the answers to these queries, the seal must first be weakened.”

Do I look like an idiot to you? I even suspect that your anxiety and worry might be fabricated to exert pressure and intimidate… But given Termiboros’s previous conduct, even if progress hadn’t been made, such overt intentions should not have been revealed so swiftly… Monette’s appearance was indeed oddly coincidental, his actions shrouded in inexplicable bizarreness. If possible, I must evade him. It’s safer to assume he poses considerable danger rather than underestimate and expose myself… With a brisk pace, Lumian gathered his belongings, clutched the carbide lamp, and exited the quarry cave.

Drawing upon the subterranean map meticulously memorized from Gardner Martin’s records, Lumian navigated closer to Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, discreetly delving a few meters below ground level to stumble upon another somber, soundless quarry cave. He incorporated no fewer than three evasive maneuvers along the way to evade potential trackers.

Phew… Exhaling a breath of relief, Lumian surveyed his surroundings and rested his carbide lamp upon the ground. On a moderately level rock, he arranged the candles and ritual components, ensuring their proper alignment.

Abruptly, a flicker of motion in the shadows at the quarry’s edge pricked his senses.

Hiss… Lumian's heart skipped a beat. Clasping the carbide lamp cautiously, he directed its beam toward the source.

A bluish-yellow radiance pierced the obscurity, unveiling a black rat partially concealed by gravel.

The rat made no effort to evade the light; it stood still. After a few heartbeats, it pivoted languidly and vanished into a minuscule crevice at the rock wall's base.

For some reason, Lumian sensed a disproportion between the rat's right and left eyes.

Gripping the carbide lamp, tension once again coursed through Lumian. He hushed, "Temiboros, is there a problem here too?"

Termiboros's voice resonated within Lumian's being, emanating a regal aura.

"It's best if you pray to The Fool immediately for angelic protection before moving elsewhere."

Could the situation be that grave? Lumian's pupils dilated. Swiftly producing an additional candle, he hastily constructed the altar.

Not a shred of concern lingered regarding Termiboros potentially manipulating him into a detrimental choice. After all, supplicating The Fool was Lumian's last resort, and it undeniably served his interests.

From a different vantage, the very fact that circumstances compelled an Inevitability angel to indirectly beseech The Fool's protection implied that something far amiss was afoot. Unleashed, the peril would prove unfathomable!

Being both mentally and physically optimal, Lumian's adept hands fashioned the candles, a process lasting just over ten seconds. He sanctified the dagger and forged a wall of spirituality that enshrouded solely him and the altar.

Methodically, he ignited the three candles sequentially, from deity to humanity, from left to right, punctuating with drops of essential oil and extract.

Amidst the haze and wisps of fog, Lumian exhaled, reciting gravely, "The Fool that doesn't belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.

"I implore you,

As the ritual unfolded, Lumian surrendered to the mist's embrace, the prickle of his skin, the lassitude of his mind. Once more, he glimpsed the twelve-winged seraph, pure luminescence descending from infinite heights to envelop him.

As the radiant wings receded and dissolved, Lumian's senses jolted back to him. Gauging his state, he hastened to pack up the altar items and hastily exited the

mine's confines.

Descending beneath the bustling market district, Lumian maintained his vigilant, practiced evasiveness, pushing forward with meticulous attention.

Almost twenty minutes elapsed before Lumian stumbled upon another concealed quarry cave, secured by its discreet location, courtesy of his map.

Stepping inside, he assessed the surroundings. His voice hushed, he inquired, "Temiboros, is there any issue here?"

"Presently, none," Termiboros responded.

Lumian shut his eyes, a newfound calm settling over him.

He mulled over his options.

Should I surface and await the anomaly's dissipation before seeking out a secluded haven for the boon-praying ritual? Or should I seize the moment, briefly escape the abnormality, and hasten my progression to Contractee, capitalizing on The Fool's angelic protection?

In keeping with Lumian's disposition, he leaned towards the risk. The scenario wouldn't change later. He couldn't ascertain if the anomaly had genuinely dissipated. He needed the counsel of someone higher in rank.

In that case, he might as well seek that counsel now!

The altar was reinstated. Yet, this time, he bypassed protection or boons, summoning instead Madam Magician's messenger.

The "doll" messenger, clad in a gown of light gold, coalesced above the flickering candle flame.

Observing Lumian, it grumbled, "This isn't a good place."

With that, it retrieved the hastily inscribed letter from Lumian's hand.

The letter briefly recounted Monette's behavior and Termiboros's response, querying the possibility of initiating the boon prayer ritual at present.

Lumian exercised some cunning here. He didn't outright solicit Madam Magician's protection, merely inquired about feasibility.

Hiring a demigod came at a steep price. Lumian deemed it currently unaffordable. Instead, he aimed to draw her attention by inquiring.

Of course, if push came to shove, he'd consider it. Debts could be repaid. Or if the person was deceased, repayment became moot.

This isn't a good place… Does this pertain to the current quarry cave or the entirety of Underground Trier? Lumian contemplated the messenger's words.

Swiftly, the messenger returned, bearing Madam Magician's response: "That's a big problem."

Madam Magician's opening remark twitched Lumian's eyelids.

"Of course, the situation isn't dire—at least, I haven't discovered the gravest entity's return to this world yet.

"What we must ascertain is His true intent. Termiboros's reaction implies He's the target, but this individual excels at concealing motives. This may well be a calculated illusion meant to deceive us or another party.

"For the time being and the foreseeable future, anomalies should be absent. Stabilize yourself and proceed with the boon prayer.

His? That's an angel? The entity whose hostility Monette exhibited is an angel? Lumian hissed involuntarily, engulfed by a renewed surge of trepidation.

This brought to mind the uniqueness of Salle de Bal Unique. He suspected that confronting them to reclaim a debt might entangle him with a host of angelic Blessed!

Seeing Madam Magician's assessment align with Termiboros's, Lumian composed himself and reconfigured the altar.

Before long, he focused on the pair of gray-white candles symbolizing Inevitability's power and himself. Amidst the intricate fragrance of gray amber perfume, he retreated slightly and intoned deeply, "Power of Inevitability!

"You are the past, the present, and the future;

"You are the cause, the effect, and the process."

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Chapter 316 - 316 “Invitation Letter”

316 “Invitation Letter”

In a repetition of events, the silver-black candle flame once again solidified into a beam of light, striking Lumian’s left chest, already wracked with agony and turmoil.

Amidst the pervading gray fog and the unsettling black wind, a silvery-black illusionary liquid began to trickle out.

At some elusive point in time, Lumian’s pain and vertigo faded into insignificance. He felt as though he had transformed into an entirely different entity.

Standing in the wilderness, he gripped a wooden bow in his hand and released an arrow that gleamed with a blue radiance toward his aerial target.

Lumian vaguely remembered who he was, but he felt that everything was extremely real and he was experiencing it.

The keen, spectral-blue arrow cut through the sky, finding its mark in the belly of a dusky vulture.

An acute agony surged into Lumian’s consciousness. He observed himself beating his wings, descending with an arrow lodged perilously close to his abdomen.

No, why have I become a vulture… Amidst the present experience, Lumian maintained a fragment of awareness about his own state and condition.

Bang!

He collided brutally with the ground, each bone fracturing with excruciating force. Agony pierced his core.

Lumian teetered on the brink of unconsciousness as a hyena lunged, its sights set on him.

Warm, repulsively scented flesh filled his mouth. He found himself ravaging the lifeless form of the grayish-black vulture. The bluish-tinged arrowhead had snapped within the avian creature.

This taste is nauseating… I’m no Ludwig, the monstrous child… Lumian’s internal complaint resounded.

He didn’t completely mistake himself for a hyena, but he continued to bite and devour his prey uncontrollably, not letting go of the poisoned parts.

Abruptly, a searing pain stabbed into his back, and he was thrust onto the ground by razor-sharp claws.

His attacker: an uncanny lion marred by decay, oozing blood-yellow pus from its wounds.

Lumian tore the hyena’s throat apart and retreated with it into the nearby underbrush.

As he witnessed the scene through an observer’s lens, he systematically dismantled the hyena.

Amidst a mix of satisfaction and revulsion, Lumian’s abdomen seethed. His Beyonder powers, teetering on the edge of control, were fully ignited by the venom, resulting in a chaotic anomaly.

His sanity waned, spiraling into insanity. All that remained was an insatiable urge to obliterate the beings before him, to unleash chaos.

No, I mustn’t succumb… The paramount objective remains incomplete… Lumian drew in the faint, sweet aroma of gray amber, resisting complete surrender to madness.

In the midst of his cathartic sprint, his attention fixed on a hunter, and he lunged at the figure.

With a wooden bow in his grasp, Lumian caught a whiff of a repugnant odor and sighted a decaying lion, two wart-like growths on its shoulders.

Its mouth, adorned with remnants of vibrant red flesh and blood, stretched to its limit.

A jolt of alarm coursed through Lumian as his full self-awareness returned. He discerned that the hunter’s “form” had turned ethereal, akin to the vulture, hyena, and lion, morphing into intricate silver-black words and bizarre symbols.

The words linked with the symbol, weaving a ring that abruptly contracted into his body.

Lumian’s eyes opened, and he confronted the flickering silver-black candle flame. A half-meter-tall stone, functioning as an altar, met his gaze.

The encounter felt tangibly authentic… As if I had been the vulture, the hyena, the lion, and another human… Lumian massaged his throbbing head and gradually rose to his feet. Reflecting on his prior experiences, he assimilated the newfound knowledge within his mind.

He couldn’t remember when he rolled on the ground in pain.

Phew… Exhaling deeply, Lumian affirmed that he had acquired a fresh boon and transformed into a Contractee.

He swiftly tidied up the altar, dismantled the wall of spirituality, and grabbed the carbide lamp, ready to leave the quarry cave at any moment.

Simultaneously, Lumian assessed his transformation and the Contractee’s abilities.

His spirituality had seen a marked increase.

His Dancer flexibility and the Alms Monk’s endurance in harsh environments had shown modest improvement, though not substantial.

His intuitive sense for luck had also seen a slight upgrade. However, upon recognizing that Termiboros could sway his fate and judgment, he refrained from frequently relying on this ability for protection.

Summoning Dance now exerted a broader sphere of influence, and his ability to forcefully possess the bizarre creatures had extended further.

The Contractee status bestowed upon him just a single fresh ability—the power to enter into a contract with a summoned creature, directly borrowing a distinctive characteristic skill.

Contrary to Lumian’s anticipations, this unique contract had merged with his body and soul during his advancement. Its transfer to others was impossible.

In essence, he had become an indivisible part of the contract, the most pivotal aspect. In time, he would need to rely on this element to compose the remaining sections of the contract and offer them to the target creature for “signing.”

After musing for a time, Lumian had a rudimentary understanding of the specifics of the Contract ability.

The agreement could solely be formed with the consent of the target creature.

Once the contract was sealed, he could handpick the traits he desired, guided by his volition.

With each ratified contract, not only would he acquire a skill, but he’d also assimilate a measure of influence from the contracted being. The higher its rank, the greater the adverse impact.

The count of contracts inked depended on his resilience. Perhaps he could endure just one high-level or exceedingly potent attribute. Several ordinary traits might be borne, keeping pace with his standing. Particularly feeble ones could be pursued more liberally.

Upon signing a contract, a cost was entailed. Part was a tribute to the contracted entity, and the remainder was a tribute to the witness. The cost could encompass life, limbs, kin, loved ones, offerings, one's spirituality maximum, a fraction of reason, and so on. The precise demand hinged on the desires of the contracted creature.

Hence, much of the intelligence Lumian gleaned from this boon concerned the corresponding creature. This encompassed specific abilities and the "compensation" the counterpart sought.

Nevertheless, most of these odd creatures were sinister and uncanny, and the price he'd need to pay was consistent. Lumian didn't wish to select from their ranks.

Of course, this wasn't the prime rationale. Conceivably, these creatures harboring the mystical knowledge interwoven with the power of Inevitability had ties to the entity known as Inevitability. Lumian dreaded that forging a contract with them might covertly manipulate him, propelling his destiny into the abyss.

Consequently, Lumian had no intention of designating the entity as the object of prayer and witness while entering into a pact.

A superior choice was at hand: Mr. Fool!

According to the sermons in The Fool's cathedral that Lumian had heard, this great entity reigned over the spirit world. The Angel of the Holy Spirit by His throne presided over the spirit world on His behalf.

Even if embellished, this testified to Mr. Fool's considerable sway in the spirit world.

In such a situation, Lumian—marked by The Fool's seal and enlisting The Fool as an intermediary and pact witness—could potentially yield substantial advantages and concealed benefits when attempting to forge a pact with a spirit world creature. It was just like other Contractees signing contracts with strange creatures that came with knowledge.

Lumian promptly sorted through the recently acquired knowledge and discerned that certain aspects remained quite ambiguous, as if they encompassed myriad possibilities.

For instance, the stipulation of obtaining the target creature's consent before signing a contract did not specify the methodology of obtaining consent. Securing agreement through offerings as a bribe constituted consent, but so did beating them into unreserved submission. Similarly, the "compensation" demanded by the latter should be negotiable.

Additionally, the deleterious impacts that the acquired knowledge from contracted creatures brought along, along with the limits of one's endurance, precluded the prospect of Lumian circumventing the system to forge a pact with a high-ranking creature and attaining godlike power at a reasonable price via Mr. Fool's seal, the

sovereign of the spirit world.

Nonetheless, the liberty to cherry-pick any amalgamation of skills within a defined spectrum imposed a considerable upper boundary on the potential of a Contractee. Naturally, the floor was equally low. Opting for an ill-suited skill and exacting an erroneous price could render one subpar even in comparison to an elite non-Beyonder individual's aptitudes.

Lumian steadied himself and murmured with a sense of contentment, "Temiboros, do you have anything to add?"

To be candid, Lumian's foremost apprehension upon descending into the underground was whether Termiboros would exploit the boon-seeking ritual to instigate harm. After all, the potency of the boon he was acquiring was escalating, posing a genuine threat to the angel of Inevitability. Even if securely sealed, He would unearth a method to stir up discord. It was improbable for Him to remain inert, permitting His strength to wane.

Furthermore, during the boon ritual, the seal would inevitably crack slightly, permitting the essence of Inevitability to trickle out. This would afford Termiboros a distinct opportunity.

Initially, Lumian had intended to solicit safeguards before officially beseeching a boon. Unexpectedly, Monette's bizarre appearance and the angel backing him had expedited the need for a blessing. Termiboros had turned more tractable, abstaining from conspicuous interference.

Termiboros's voice resounded with His response, "The mine entrance."

The mine entrance… What does that imply? Lumian clutched the carbide lamp and advanced toward the entrance of the quarry cave, mired in bewilderment.

A bluish-yellow luminescence cast light over the debris-strewn expanse, revealing a meticulously trimmed piece of stiff paper.

It wasn't present when I entered… Lumian tensed and cautiously drew closer. On the ebony paper, a monocle had been meticulously drawn, almost replicating reality. Four lines of bold, vibrant red Intisian words graced the page:

"Salle de Bal Unique

"Night of Lovers

"7 p.m. on the last night of every month

"You're invited."

Salle de Bal Unique… Monocle… Night of Lovers… Lumian's thoughts instantly summoned an image of Monette donning a monocle in his right eye socket.

He had earnestly invoked The Fool's angelic safeguard and expended considerable effort to elude detection, yet he had failed to shake off the enigmatic trickster?

No, Mr. Fool's angelic blessing exudes a high-tier anti-divination and anti-prophecy influence. Unless Monette has been lurking in my vicinity without being thrown off, it's implausible for him to regain proximity! Lumian's heart skipped a beat as he instinctively surveyed the surroundings.

Silence reigned within the obscurity bordering the quarry cave. Yet, Lumian's skin prickled, as though an abundance of eyes remained concealed within the air.

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Chapter 317 - 317 Summoning Target

317 Summoning Target

In the Cordu days, Lumian might have snatched up that invitation and made his way to the Salle de Bal Unique by month's end, all to unleash a prank to return the shock.

However, this time around, Lumian's grip on the mystical world was firmer, a result of his brush with countless otherworldly aberrations. He conjured a flicker with the snap of his fingers, sending forth a crimson spark that alighted on the ebony paper before him.

Amidst the swiftly burgeoning flames, Lumian departed the quarry cavern, his carbide lamp casting its light, guiding him towards the nearest exit of the Underground Trier.

Yet, on this journey, an unshakable paranoia seized him. The moss on the rocky walls, the unseen insects within the shadows, even the intangible entities that traversed the air—it was as if Monette's eyes bore into him from all angles.

It wasn't mere illusion but rather a reality that wound Lumian's mind taut, each heartbeat a gallop of unease.

Termiboros's unwavering quiet provided the lone solace, a lack of agitation hinting that the quandary hadn't escalated—yet.

A quarter-hour's passage led Lumian to ascend the steel stairs, emerging onto solid ground once more.

As sunbeams pierced the sky, penetrating a sea of white clouds and bathing his visage in their glow, he felt as though he'd been reborn.

Phew, no wonder Madam Magician said to live under the sun in Trier as much as possible… Exhaling a sigh, Lumian snuffed the carbide lamp, locked in his bearings, and charted his course back to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Upon reentering the safe house, he immediately summoned Madam Magician's messenger, apprising the holder of the Major Arcana card of the developments that unfolded.

Madam Magician's reply was simple:

"Exemplary work. Steer clear of Salle de Bal Unique.

“The Lord’s Angel of Time shall keep vigilant watch over this affair.”

Why would Mr. Fool’s Angel of Time direct His attention toward Salle de Bal Unique? Is there indeed an Angel of Time? The angelic entity whom the charlatans of Salle de Bal Unique revere bears a link to Mr. Fool’s Angel of Time. Or perhaps, an animosity? Lumian ruminated, momentarily adrift in the murk of comprehension.

With a measure of relief prevailing, he reclined upon the bed, surrendering himself to sleep’s embrace—an interlude wherein his mental fortitude and vitality underwent reinvigoration.

At noon, Lumian ate two savory meat pies and drank a glass of Apple Whiskey Sour. Seated at the table, he engaged in earnest perusal of the bestiary chronicling the spirit world creatures.

As he raced through the pages, a sleek black fountain pen danced in his hand, crafting purposeful circles on the paper to accentuate potential candidates.

After over an hour of intense scrutiny, Lumian distilled a preliminary list of 50 to 60 spirit world entities boasting suitable attributes and modest threat levels. Following the breadcrumbs of indicated page numbers, he retrieved the source manuscripts and embarked on meticulous research.

Intermittent breaks punctuated his reading. As evening painted the sky in hues of twilight, Lumian at last concluded his meticulous perusal of the source materials, now in possession of their profound knowledge. A final selection had been forged.

First in line was the Abscessed Hand. This enigmatic spirit, once shrouded in legend across the southern and central parts of the world, had been conjured by aficionados of mysticism, leaving a trail of lifeless bodies in its wake.

From crime scene accounts, the fallen were strewn across the forest expanse. With the exception of those initially claimed within a hunter’s lodge, the remaining deaths occurred nearly simultaneously. This revelation hinted at the Abscessed Hand’s swift transitions between victims, throttling one soul and in a heartbeat, lunging towards its next quarry.

Dream divinations unveiled a bluish-black, gangrenous hand, swollen and oozing with putrescence. Its appearance was always abrupt, snapping a victim’s neck within two to three seconds before vanishing to assail another, irrespective of the distance.

Based on the hand’s traits, Lumian inferred its considerable aptitude for traversing the spirit world.

As for its danger level, Madam Magician’s accounts deemed it commonplace, bound by the constraints of the summoning ritual.

Nevertheless, a significant detail stood out from the Major Arcana card holder: “It’s suspected to be a fragment of something greater.”

Severed hand? Could its kindred comprise severed legs, heads, torsos, and innards? What would happen when these fragments converge? If reassembled, what would manifest? Lumian scoured the index in vain, failing to unearth analogous entities. His focus rested on abilities, traits, and threat levels, with little heed to nomenclature.

An alternative theory remained afoot. The remaining Abscessed Hand counterparts might reside within the powerful and dangerous categories, evading the scrutiny of Franca, Jenna, and the Rabbits of Knowledge.

Should the anticipated spirit world traversal prowess prove elusive, or if the cost demanded an untenable toll, Lumian had an arsenal of alternatives at his disposal.

With regards to disguising abilities, he found a peculiar fondness for a spirit world creature known as the Headless Bride.

This mythical tale was woven within the heart of the Haagenti Kingdom in the Southern Continent. It began with the story of a young girl who dared to elope with her beloved.

In the shadowed chambers of their hidden nuptials, her kin unveiled the shrouded ceremony. Amidst the assembly of family and kin, her own brother exacted a swift, brutal end, severing her head in the name of matrimonial transgression and ancestral decree.

Perhaps this girl was special to begin with, or perhaps she had come into contact with something related to the spirit world during her elopement. Thus, ignited by the agony, fury, and rancor that gripped her before her demise, she imbibed the essence of the spirit world, transmuting into a creature akin to an evil spirit.

Dressed in scarlet bridal raiment adorned with gilded motifs, she hunted and hexed her lineage, subjecting them to an unending torrent of catastrophes spanning three decades, until the tapestry of their lineage was all but erased.

In the present, the Headless Bride prowled the spirit world, shape-shifting with calculated artistry. Its transformations beguiled unwary beings and unsuspecting travelers, drawing them closer to their doom in its relentless embrace.

For a Pyromaniac, this was an easy target with the protection of a ritual.

Headless Bride’s alternative was Human-Faced Mantis:

“This is a unique creature from the spirit world. When he was alive, he was a playboy with elegance and good looks.

“As an educator in Sion within the Intis Republic’s Hornacis Province, he was embraced by admiration and ardor from both distinguished dames and youthful

maidens.

“He was gifted in literature, skilled in poetry, and had numerous lovers.

“This idyllic existence found an abrupt termination when a spurned spouse denounced him to the Church as a Warlock, accusing him of employing sorcery to control his wife.

“Agents dispatched by the Eternal Blazing Sun Church probed into the matter, gathering accounts from a multitude of local men. Astonishingly, their testimonies echoed the allegations in the complaint letter. Strangers to one another, these men’s narratives converged in unsettling symmetry.

“In contrast, the dames and young maidens adamantly attested to their willing involvement, fervently defending the playboy’s actions.

“Amid simmering resentment from the local men, the trial raced to a conclusion. The playboy met his end at the stake.

“Upon later investigation, officials confirmed his innocence, unveiling the accusations as a construct of collective envy and enmity.

“It’s suggested that an Instigator was behind the scenes.

“In the spirit world, the playboy’s essence metamorphosed into a mantis bearing a human visage. Festering within him was an all-consuming loathing, mingling with a mastery over metamorphosis and relentless predation…”

Lumian turned emotional as he read the two pieces of information.

Six years in the countryside had acquainted him with the ignorance that shadowed village life.

From this, he deduced that not all spirit world denizens sprang from nature’s womb. Rather, under exceptional circumstances, the souls of departed humans could transmute into enduring spirit creatures. A plausible explanation for hauntings.

Pondering meticulously, Lumian relinquished his aspiration for invisibility and concealment. Instead, he earmarked his final contract slot for traits with direct influence over his Spirit Body.

His choices boiled down to the Thousand-Eyed Evil and the Shadow of Shriek.

These two entities were quintessential ‘natives’ of the spirit world, venturing forth only in the realms of nightmares and tomes of authentic Warlock craft.

The Thousand-Eyed Evil comprised fleshy forms, exuding a pink ichor, each adorned with an eye bereft of lashes.

Gazing into the ebony pupils of these multitudes, whether human, beast, or mere Spirit Bodies, led to swift slumber.

Their connection to dreams was palpable; they occasionally manifested in the darkest recesses of the most harrowing nightmares.

The Shadow of Shriek, on the other hand, manifested as a confluence of translucent shadows. With frequent outbursts of shrieks, they induced unconsciousness in those who dared to draw near.

Beyond their shrieks, they bore the attributes of ordinary shadows.

Lumian meticulously transcribed all the details concerning the alternative contenders onto fresh paper, folding it as he slipped the paper into his pocket.

He lingered within the precincts of Salle de Bal Brise for a period, eventually departing from Avenue du Marché around 10 p.m. Navigating the pathways along Rist docks, he ultimately gained entry into the two-story edifice he had once reduced to smoldering ruins.

Though the inferno that had previously ravaged the building had long since been quelled, the structure now stood cloaked in inky darkness and utter desolation.

Recognizing that his intended audience was none other than Mr. Fool, rather than the entity called Inevitability, Lumian had no intentions of executing the summoning ritual underground. This strategic choice was to avoid any potential encounters with the odd and dangerous swindlers of Salle de Bal Unique.

His primary objective was to locate a secluded enclave, far removed from prying eyes. This calculated approach would ensure that even in the event of an unforeseen mishap during the conjuration, should the summoned entity lose control, the collateral damage would be contained, thereby facilitating a swift resolution.

Having meticulously arranged a relatively unscathed chamber ensconced within the obsidian heart of the decrepit building, Lumian proceeded to meticulously arrange the altar.

Relying on the insights gleaned from his role as a Contractee, Lumian diverged from the norm by invoking two additional candles, each symbolizing a deity.

In this ritual, Mr. Fool was both the focal point of supplication and the solemn observer.

With a wall of spirituality set in place and candles aglow, Lumian didn’t rush to commence the incantation. Instead, he extracted an iron-gray flask from the inner pocket of his worn brown jacket.

Within this flask, Lumian had ingeniously affixed a slender thread, its counterpart connected to the Decency brooch that lay submerged within a pool of absinthe.

This ingenious design facilitated Lumian's swift and precise retrieval of the Sealed Artifact. No clumsy maneuvering was required; a simple hook of his index finger and the Scotch Broom brooch was within his grasp.

As he tugged at the brooch, a burst of crimson sparks erupted, severing the knot binding the Sealed Artifact.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lumian adorned the resplendent Decency brooch upon his chest.

He harbored the belief that brokering a contract with a denizen of the spirit world carried an inherent cost, akin to a form of bribery. In this context, Lumian hoped the Decency brooch would assume a role of significance.

Securely fastening the brooch, Lumian's gaze shifted to the trio of candles, silently ablaze before him. Drawing a deep breath, he steeled himself for the upcoming ritual.

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Chapter 318 - 318 Price

318 Price

Lumian recited in ancient Hermes, following the precise summoning ritual as described in Aurore's grimoire and the mystical knowledge of Contractees.

"The Fool that doesn't belong to this era;

"You are the ruler above the gray fog;

"You are the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck.

"I beseech your shelter.

"I pray for your attention.

"I!

"In the name of The Fool, I summon:

"A peculiar creature that roams the upper realm, the enigmatic severed hand, the bluish-black throat crusher."

Lumian crafted this summoning incantation based on insights from the Abscessed Hand's data. As the ritual afforded some degree of protection to the subject of the invocation, and since the Abscessed Hand was not deemed perilous, he omitted the terms "weak" and "friendly," infusing it instead with other phrases that would effectively pinpoint the target creature.

The bluish-black candle flames surged, intertwining to shape an ethereal doorway adorned with cryptic symbols. A faint gray mist filled the surroundings, instilling an eerie atmosphere.

Gradually, the door creaked open, and a decaying bluish-black severed hand emerged. It loomed twice the size of Lumian's palm, with the potential to crush a human skull.

The afflicted severed hand hovered before the enigmatic illusory entrance. Its fingers extended toward Lumian's throat, yet it abstained from aggression.

Lumian retrieved a flask of military-grade alcohol, differing in hue, unscrewed the cap, and drizzled a few drops towards the altar where the Abscessed Hand stood.

The liquid struck the ground midway, but with a glint from the Scotch Broom-shaped brooch, the Bribe was discreetly consummated.

Only then did Lumian speak. His voice resonated within his throat and chest as he enunciated alien syllables.

These were words he had never encountered, sourced from the mystical knowledge of Contractees, empowering him to master their pronunciation and essence.

They fell under the Mystical Language of Fate, an integral part of this arcane tongue.

Lumian's vocal resonance coalesced into silvery-black glyphs, akin to symbols, materializing from thin air.

They descended upon the faux goatskin resting on the altar, melding into a brief yet uncanny covenant.

As the pact solidified, Lumian established an intricate connection with the Abscessed Hand, akin to utilizing the Summoning Dance to anchor it to his very being.

Through this conduit, Lumian gleaned the rudimentary abilities and traits of the Abscessed Hand, sensing its yearnings in the process.

These yearnings were the price Lumian had to pay.

"Locate my body, or godhood shall elude you forever!"

An advance payment and a debt to be settled later… Could this be the unfolding of the Bribe? No, that's not it. Upon sealing a contract, the price is promptly remitted —manifesting as my inexorable fate of ascending to demigodhood. Once I uncover the remaining segments of the Abscessed Hand, the reward shall naturally replace the price… Presently, it's akin to providing ample collateral… Lumian's musings raced as he gleaned the crux of the pact.

Concurrently, he found the coveted spirit world traversal ability from the Abscessed Hand's attributes and qualities, inclusive of its anti-divination, quasi-invincibility, and the skill to snap the necks of those without godhood.

A trait intrinsic to the Abscessed Hand, not a mere ability. Its effects marginally deviated from Lumian's expectations, yet remained within tolerable thresholds.

With Decency's utilization window limited to fifteen minutes, the cost was bearable, and its attributes neared sufficiency. Lumian squandered no time, summoning the other candidates and vowing in ancient Hermes.

"I shall aid you in finding your body. Until then, godhood shall elude me."

These words fused with the surroundings, morphing into wisps of bluish-black mist that seeped into the faux goatskin parchment.

The Abscessed Hand descended, leaving a tincture of yellow-tinged, sanguineous pus within the contract's vacant space.

Spontaneously, the covenant ignited, yielding myriad silvery-black symbols and words.

They interlinked, configuring an intricate and enigmatic pattern, abruptly condensing onto Lumian's shoulder.

Though concealed beneath his attire, Lumian's psyche conjured an image of his right shoulder.

A curious black seal-like emblem materialized there.

Instinctively, Lumian apprehended that upon activating the contract sigil, he could harness the Abscessed Hand's attributes to traverse the spirit world. Dissolution of the contract was only conceivable upon the demise of either party—a destiny preordained.

Without bothering to experiment with spirit world traversal, Lumian terminated the summoning and embarked on a fresh ritual.

…

"In the name of The Fool, I summon:

"The vengeful spirit that wanders the void, the headless bride in her eternal plight, and the wellspring of a bloodline's malevolence."

Once again, the enigmatic illusory portal manifested, enshrouded in bluish-black flames interweaving. A frigid wind swept forth, transforming the summer night into a wintry chill.

Lumian observed a form materialize from within the illusory entrance. Adorned in a vibrant red festive gown, meticulously threaded with gold, the figure stood before him.

Without question, the figure lacked a head, exuding an aura of deep-seated malice and resentment.

Lumian meticulously followed the prescribed procedure—utilizing the liquor as a "bribe," reciting the contractual pledge. He discerned the price demanded by the Headless Bride.

"Sacrifice a kin or friend."

“Thank you for your presence,” Lumian murmured with a sardonic smile, concluding the summoning.

From this seemingly fruitless summoning, he gleaned valuable insights. He confirmed that Bribe wielded a degree of influence.

The original demand from the Headless Bride entailed a kin’s sacrifice; however, Bribe had managed to expand the scope to encompass friends.

Lumian’s sights next shifted to the Human-Faced Mantis. He had formulated a summoning phrase: “The vindictive spirit that wanders the void, a hunter adopting mantis guise, a shapeshifter adept at donning human semblance.”

Amidst a peculiar swooshing sound, an immense, translucent cyan mantis emerged from beyond the illusory door.

Its head bore the visage of youth, handsome and radiant, inadvertently lowering one’s guard.

Sensing the summoner’s presence and gender, the mantis swiftly transformed into a resplendent woman attired in a black evening gown.

Internally scoffing, Lumian meticulously fulfilled the entire sequence: Bribe, recitation, and perception.

The Human-Faced Mantis delineated three categories of offerings, requiring solely one to be met: “Contractor’s reproductive organs; Contractor’s capacity for lying; Contractor’s immolation at the stake.”

Post-Bribe, the stipulations underwent some relaxation, affording an additional choice or two. This entity seeks but a single thing—human anguish… The first aligns with his malevolence towards men. If I were of the female gender, this option likely wouldn’t surface… The second corresponds to slanderers and false accusers, while the third aligns with the stake he himself endured… Lumian swiftly concluded.

As a Pyromaniac, the third demand posed no grave challenge. On one hand, he exhibited formidable resistance to flames, and on the other, enduring agony was his forte.

Were this choice absent, Lumian intended to forfeit and subsequently summon several comparable spirit world beings later. Depriving him of the power to lie would markedly undermine his capabilities, rendering survival in a place like Trier implausible. He also wasn’t certain if his reproductive organs would return at 6 a.m. after sacrificing them; he didn’t want to take the risk.

Without delay, he found the Niese Face he sought from the arsenal of the Human-Faced Mantis’s abilities.

“Niese” had been the name of the Human-Faced Mantis during its living days. The essence of this ability leaned more toward illusion than corporeal transformation. Nevertheless, absent the means to nullify it or godhood, piercing through the illusion remained beyond reach.

This occasion saw the black insignia affix to Lumian’s left shoulder, accompanied by surges of crimson flames welling from his feet.

Unperturbed by Lumian’s actions, they ignited his attire and charred his flesh.

Sensations reminiscent yet distinct from his encounter with Susanna Mattise enveloped him. An amalgamation of familiar and unfamiliar torment coursed through his consciousness, assailing his senses.

Swiftly forsaking his cherished belongings, Lumian clutched the Decency brooch in his palm.

The conflagration endured for a full three minutes. Lumian’s skin charred, his clothes imprinting scorched marks onto his body.

For a Pyromaniac, such wounds posed no mortal peril—they scarcely even qualified as severe. He maintained the vitality to prepare for the ensuing summoning.

“The enigmatic entity that roams the upper realm, a mass of flesh bedecked with myriad eyes, a participant in the abyssal realms of nightmares.”

As the chant resonated, a creature of flesh and sinew rolled forth through the illusory door. Each flesh fragment sported a white eye, its pupil veiled in obsidian.

Clasping the aluminum-white military flask, Lumian’s grip faltered, and he abruptly descended into a profound slumber, ensnared by the myriad gazes.

After an indeterminate stretch, he snapped back to consciousness, realization dawning that the ritual had concluded on its own accord. The Thousand-Eyed Evil had retreated to the spirit world, forgoing a genuine assault.

I was lulled to sleep by mere sight. Communication is impossible… Also, this level of influence lies beyond the ritual’s inherent protection… Lumian exhaled, seizing the Salle de Bal Brise pocket watch to ascertain the time.

Thankfully, I only slept for a few minutes. There’s still about three minutes left… Lumian focused, initiating afresh, summoning forth the Shadow of Shriek.

…

“The spirit that wanders in the void, a confluence of myriad silhouettes, the progenitor of incapacitating shrieks.”

Once more, the mysterious illusory entrance swung ajar. Yet, what met Lumian's gaze wasn't an anomalous shadow coiled into a blob, but a nebulous silhouette draped in a pitch-black armor resembling fish scales.

Distinct from all armors documented in newspapers and magazines, this suit bore scales each akin to miniature, writhing shadows.

Hmmm… Could the summoning incantation have been imprecise, yielding a kindred spirit world creature? It seemingly boasts an incapacitating shriek. Let's first gauge the prospects of cementing a pact… Lumian fathomed the situation and embarked upon another cycle of Bribe, utterance, and apprehension.

The armored shadow stipulated an offering: "A blood tribute of ten or more lives or gold amounting to 100,000 verl d'or."

Courtesy of Bribe, the prerequisites exhibited leniency, demanding the sacrifices be rendered within three months. Failing to comply would precipitate contract retribution, a potentiality encompassing control loss or, worse yet, fatality.

A sum of 100,000 verl d'or… Lumian discerned this to be modestly manageable, thereby delving into the ability roster and traits of the armored shadow to locate the coveted incapacitating shriek.

While scouring, he happened upon an ability bearing an intriguing nomenclature: "Spell of Harrumph."

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Chapter 319 - 319 “Travel”

319 “Travel”

The Spell of Harrumph derived its name from a combination of a snort from the nose and a harrumph from the mouth, giving it a distinct quality that Lumian found intriguing.

Moreover, the enigmatic armored shadow, while alive, was believed to be either human or a humanoid intelligent creature. Many of its distinct attributes and abilities had been given their own names. These attributes weren’t like the dense individuals who relied on Lumian to simplify and assign labels for their ease of remembrance.

Information channeled through the unique connection revealed to Lumian that the Spell of Harrumph was a spell-like ability capable of affecting a Spirit Body.

Through the dual sounds, it stirred one’s consciousness to induce a mystical transformation, generating a unique fluctuation that surged towards its designated target.

Any creature touched by such a fluctuation would experience severe dizziness at a minimum or even a Psychic Piercing assault at its worst, potentially rendering the target unconscious.

This ability would grow in potency as the user advanced in levels. In essence, it possessed the potential to influence divine entities, provided Lumian also ascended to Sequence 4 or temporarily elevated his level in some fashion.

Impressive. It’s on par with the incapacitating shriek. Moreover, harrumphing seems more dignified than indiscriminate shouting… Realizing time was of the essence, Lumian made a commitment and formalized the agreement.

He harbored a genuine curiosity about the additional attributes and capabilities of the armored shadow. Their names held a certain uncanny quality, such as the Night Parade of Ten Thousand Demons and the Soul Devouring Scream.

This instance, the seal-like object descended onto Lumian’s right chest, marking the conclusion of the ritual.

Swiftly, he secured a thread around the Decency brooch and returned it to the iron-gray military flask. Dismissing the spiritual barrier, he cleared the altar and retrieved the objects he had laid out.

Subsequently, a ghostly light emanated from Lumian's right shoulder, and he abruptly vanished, traversing into a mystical realm drenched in layers of hues and peculiar creatures.

In the subsequent moment, he exited the spirit world, dazed, reappearing in his bedroom on the second story of Salle de Bal Brise.

As Lumian massaged his throbbing head, he surveyed his surroundings and nodded approvingly.

It's indeed true spirit world traversal. This ability is very useful…

The only problem rested in its exorbitant spirituality cost. With Lumian's Contractee and Pyromaniac enhancements, he could only execute it three to four times. Considering the consumption of flames and the contingency allocation for safety measures, he could employ it once or twice in a relatively intense confrontation.

For a pure Contractee, they could merely "teleport" twice as standard procedure, excluding any other expenditure.

Furthermore, this was contingent on selecting a proximate coordinate. Of course, proximity didn't exclusively signify the immediate vicinity.

The spirit world encompassed a realm of mystique and peculiarity. Up, down, left, right, front, back—even time—intermingled there. It intersected with the real world, governed by its distinct chaos. Beyond concepts linked in nature, everything else seemed scattered without deliberate arrangement.

In essence, Trier as a holistic notion held sway. It boasted a corresponding domain in the spirit world, unsullied by fragmentation or dispersal. Nonetheless, its surroundings extended beyond neighboring towns and villages. It might correlate to a river's conceptual presence in the Southern Continent, or manifest as a settlement projection for undersea beings.

Minus precise coordinates, Lumian could solely "teleport" within Trier's immediate ambit. Otherwise, he risked straying into the spirit world's treacherous realm, a hazardous endeavor indeed.

When he had endeavored to traverse the spirit world previously, all of Trier's locations had materialized within his consciousness as unfamiliar coordinates. This granted him the capacity to "teleport" back to Salle de Bal Brise instead of venturing to remote corners of the metropolis.

Concurrently, Lumian faintly perceived the Highlands Kingdom's City of White, Rapus—his former destination. It wasn't overtly distant in the spirit world from Trier, but neither was it nearby. Directly "teleporting" there remained infeasible for Lumian. He needed to ascertain one or two intermediate coordinates between the two locations.

Remarkable. Lumian acknowledged with satisfaction.

Inclusive of limited uses and range, his spirit world traversal from Abscessed Hand perfectly met his expectations.

Lumian proceeded to the full-length mirror. Activating the black mark on his left shoulder, he observed his charred form transition into that of a middle-aged man, featuring a few strands of silver at his temples. His cheeks were rounded, eyes amber-red, and facial contours dignified. The features were sharp, radiating an approachable aura.

Gardner Martin!

It can replicate one's appearance, physique, and demeanor. Yet actions and mannerisms must stem solely from myself… Lumian evaluated Niese Face's potential.

The transformation had expended a notable degree of spirituality, but its maintenance necessitated but a fraction. He could adopt Gardner Martin's likeness for more than ten hours.

Dispelling Niese Face, Lumian retreated a few paces. Gazing upon the mirror, he opened his mouth.

"Ha!"

In response, his spirit surged into the black mark on his right chest. His Spirit Body quivered, releasing an almost imperceptible yellow light from his mouth.

The radiance penetrated the mirror, traversing the wall, vanishing after a span of nearly ten meters.

Effective solely at close quarters… Consuming less spirituality than spirit world traversal yet surpassing Niese Face in expenditure. Applicable four or five times within combat… Lumian, his body marred by burns, exhaled leisurely. He donned his attire, settled onto the bed, and surrendered to sleep.

Temporarily shelving thoughts of the gold he owed the armored shadow and the commitment to locate Abscessed Hand's body, Lumian had ample time for these matters. Current requisites centered on recuperation and rest, alongside allowing the repugnant aura accompanying the Decency brooch to dissipate.

The next morning.

Lumian, clad in a black felt hat, shirt, sweater, and sturdy jacket, pressed the doorbell of Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca greeted him with a downcast countenance, seemingly taken aback by Lumian's outfit.

“Is your sense of temperature playing tricks on you?”

Lumian inquired, “Have you gotten your hands on genuine mummy ashes?”

“Didn’t you ask that very question just yesterday?” Franca snapped.

The answer was no.

A smile tugged at Lumian’s lips.

“I’ll take you to find a real mummy.”

“Where?” Franca was puzzled and curious.

Lumian stepped into the room and replied nonchalantly, “The Southern Continent’s Star Highlands.”

“How will we get there?” Franca glanced toward the washroom before lowering her voice. “Are you suggesting we bother your Major Arcana card holder?”

“I’ve merely penned a letter to inquire about a transit junction,” Lumian responded with a smile.

“Transit junction…” Franca combined her understanding of the mystical arts and swiftly formulated a hypothesis. “Have you obtained a mystical artifact capable of teleportation?”

Lumian shook his head and elaborated succinctly,”Through my contracted creature.”

“What sort of contract yields such extraordinary results?” Franca exclaimed, genuine surprise tinging her words.

She had been wondering over Lumian’s haste in filtering contracted creatures. Typically, those amenable to a Sequence 7 contract were fairly commonplace. Moreover, their summoning typically necessitated a ritual, rendering them rather impractical for most confrontations.

Lumian let out a chuckle.

“A unique kind of contract.”

“Uh…” Franca studied Lumian carefully, circling around him.

The pants-wearing, shirt-clad Witch cleared her throat and remarked, “Are we considered brothers?”

“Not quite,” Lumian answered promptly. “We hold different beliefs!”

Franca lowered her voice again. “Isn’t it just superficially Steamed, but actually, it’s Mr. Fool?”

Lumian replied piously, “I still maintain some faith in the Eternal Blazing Sun.”

After all, he had upheld this faith for nearly six years.

Franca found herself momentarily speechless. After a few seconds, she inquired, “Could we be considered friends?”

“Yes.” Lumian now spoke in accordance with his true feelings.

Franca’s brows eased.

“Could you teach me that unique contract? Name the price.”

She made her request straightforwardly.

Lumian shook his head again.

“I can only employ that contract due to unique circumstances.”

“Alright.” Franca refrained from pressing further, though a tinge of disappointment lingered.

At that moment, Jenna emerged from the washroom. Lumian asked half-teasingly, “Are you interested in journeying to the Southern Continent?”

“Travel? Why would I want to travel?” Jenna appeared perplexed.

Franca swiftly recounted her need for genuine mummy ashes and Lumian’s method of “teleporting” to the Star Highlands. Ultimately, she queried, “Do you wish to come along and observe?”

Jenna deliberated briefly and responded, “Okay.”

She recognized her need for greater experience in the realm of Beyonder powers, a necessity for observation, learning, and training.

Furthermore, her maximum geographical range had been confined to Trier’s Quartier de la Maison d’Opéra. For a while, she had been captivated by tales of the Southern Continent circulating in the taverns and dance halls.

Lumian assessed his two companions and offered a gentle reminder with a smile, “I’d advise you to don thicker garments. The altitude is considerable, and it’s currently winter there.”

“Oh…” Franca looked at Lumian and understood why he had bundled up for winter.

Before long, Franca changed into a black coat resembling leather armor and donned dark knee-length pants with plush interiors, adopting the guise of a female mercenary or bounty hunter. Jenna hadn't yet transported her thick clothes, thus she borrowed Franca's clothing. Though their appearances matched, Jenna was shorter, necessitating a tightened belt, secured sleeves, and rolled-up pant legs to prevent impeded mobility.

Lumian reached out and grabbed their shoulders, activating the contract mark on his right shoulder.

A spectral light danced along the seams of his clothing, enveloping Jenna and Franca in a surreal realm, awash with vibrant overlapping hues and enigmatic creatures retreating in every direction.

In an instant, they departed the spirit world, materializing on a desolate island.

Before Jenna and Franca could fully adjust, Lumian initiated spirit world traversal once more.

Upon their return to reality, the Assassins found themselves facing a distant snow-clad mountain peak and an adjacent foreign city dominated by a white edifice.

Jenna soon regained her composure and involuntarily exclaimed, "How magical…"

If she were compelled to encapsulate the magic and articulate her sentiments, a choice of expletives might have been used.

Although not certain if this location was indeed the Southern Continent's Star Highlands, the fact that she could translocate swiftly from Rue des Blouses Blanches to this wilderness underscored the mystical potential of teleportation!

Lumian endured the pulsing headache and the substantial drain on his spiritual energy as he pointed toward the City of White, seemingly unperturbed.

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Chapter 320 - 320 Mummy

320 Mummy

Franca and Jenna couldn't tear their eyes away from the grazing herd of cows, sheep, and horses. The swarthy men donned felt hats and thick blue or red robes, while the local women flaunted their colorful, multi-layered gowns. Numerous white buildings and shops peddling leather products dotted the scene. It was a captivating and unfamiliar sight.

Franca stepped aside as a wooden carriage, drawn by a long-haired bull, trundled by in the biting wind. She glanced at Lumian and Jenna before speaking up.

"Why the silence? Let's engage with the locals."

After all, what was the point of wandering without interacting?

Lumian fell momentarily quiet before responding, "I lack sufficient information."

Jenna felt a pang of embarrassment. "I don't know enough either."

All she was acquainted with were tales of romantic exploits featuring Pharaoh queens and adventurers unearthing treasures within rainforests.

"Uh…" Franca gestured dismissively with her right hand. "I'm not much better."

How much is not much? Lumian didn't pry further. He ushered his companions into a shop named Highland Mystic Potion.

The proprietor, Sallent Empaya, an Intisian dressed in a blue coat adorned with gold accents, recognized Lumian right away. After all, his distinctive hair color and appearance set him apart. Moreover, only a few days had passed since their last encounter.

Sallent assessed Franca and Jenna, extending a warm smile to Lumian. "What brings you here this time?"

Lumian, struggling with a headache from expending too much spirituality, got straight to the point. "Real mummy's ashes. I want to see the mummy!"

Sallent's eyes flickered briefly, but he refrained from probing. "Very well, I'll show you."

Being a seasoned purveyor of mummy ashes, he knew these products didn't bestow virility; they were combined with genuinely efficacious medicine before

hitting the shelves. However, since the clients didn't inquire about the practicality of real mummy ashes, he saw no need to divulge that information.

Furthermore, he suspected Lumian and the two women intended to purchase a mummy for resale and profit. This was a substantial transaction.

Sallent temporarily closed his shop and guided Lumian, Franca, and Jenna to the rear warehouse, where ordinary herbs were stored. They descended a narrow staircase, reaching the basement door.

Turning to face Lumian and the others, he sought confirmation. "Do you really want to see it?"

It wasn't so much a guilty conscience as a cautionary note.

"Absolutely," Lumian responded without a moment's hesitation.

In the midst of his words, his gaze fixated on the basement's pitch-black wooden door.

It bore a mystical symbol, its form a distortion of dark-green and pale-white hues.

Within, a mix of rudimentary skulls, intertwined arms and vines, and inverted triangles melded to create an enigmatic pattern.

Threads of the same hues radiated outward from these symbols, infiltrating walls, floor, and ceiling alike.

Sallent brought forth a golden key, advancing toward the door. Franca's voice dipped to a hush as she addressed Lumian and Jenna. "Those arcane symbols appear rooted in the domain of Death."

Jenna furrowed her brow. "What significance do they hold?"

Franca's head shook gently as she replied, "I'm uncertain. Generally, these would play a pivotal role in ritualistic magic. Yet, without a wellspring of power, such magic can falter.

"As I understand, the cathedrals of orthodox Churches feature akin arrangements. The devout believers who pray daily lend their spirits and spirituality to sustain the ritualistic magic. While individual contributions may seem modest, their accumulation wields ample strength."

"Perhaps this location holds the power necessary for sustaining ritualistic magic." Lumian grinned at Franca. "You might have a reason to rejoice. This perspective heightens the likelihood of finding a genuine mummy."

A relieved sigh escaped Franca's lips. "Hopefully, counterfeits aren't as rampant here as in Trier."

Perplexed, she inquired, “But why the need to bring us here to see a real mummy? My divination could discern the authenticity of the ashes.”

“To broaden your horizons,” Lumian replied confidently.

Before Franca could curse, he added, “Directly requesting mummy’s ashes might tempt him to provide counterfeits. When your divination results manifest on the spot, should I then smash his cabinet or engage in a scuffle? Such violence is hardly ideal.”

Lumian drew on an adage often uttered by Aurore.

Of course, he left out the adverse effects of the three contracts. The Abscessed Hand stoked a yearning to snap a target’s neck. The Human-Faced Mantis fueled a heightened disdain for those who unjustly maligned the innocent. The armored shadow goaded him to break free from the shackles of life’s confines.

Perhaps Mr. Fool’s witness or the boon of Bribe rendered these effects relatively manageable. They were detriments he could subdue with focus, yet their collective might occasionally sparked such impulses.

Simultaneously, Franca and Jenna scoffed, unified in their disdain.

Only Hunters harbored an affection for violence!

At that juncture, after a brief struggle with the lock, Sallent triumphantly swung open the pitch-black wooden door, its surface adorned with a cryptic symbol.

Within the basement passageway, Lumian’s eyes landed on wall-embedded oil lamps, forever alight.

Drenched in the dancing hues of dark-green firelight, Franca and her companions trailed behind Sallent, the shopkeeper of concealed curatives, as they ventured into the corridor that lay beyond the portal.

Light permeated the space, yet an illusion of advancing into darkness seized them step by step.

The already cold atmosphere seemed to plummet several degrees Celsius lower.

Sallent proceeded seven to eight meters ahead, navigating past firmly shut grayish-white stone doors. He halted before a chamber positioned at the corridor’s midpoint.

These stone doors and the encompassing walls bore symbols akin to those at the basement entrance.

Sallent nudged open the stone door confronting him, unveiling a diminutive sepulcher to Lumian and his comrades.

In the chamber's heart rested an exotic humanoid sarcophagus adorned with a golden base and a kaleidoscope of colors.

"This mummy hails from five centuries ago," Sallent introduced, drawing near the stone casket and pressing down its lid.

"He seems rather unconcerned about us making off with the mummy…" Lumian mused under his breath.

Franca emitted a soft chuckle, her voice hushed. "Perhaps he simply thinks nothing of us."

Jenna remained silent during their exchange, her curiosity and trepidation fixated on the innards of the golden sarcophagus.

Within, a corpse swathed in yellowish-brown fabric lay. Its lips were slightly parted, while faint voids marked the spots where eyes once resided. Hints of seeped oil stained its form.

Unrestrained by the foreign surroundings, Franca extracted a mirror and initiated a divination before Sallent's presence.

His eyes flickered momentarily, swiftly reverting to their prior state, as if he'd encountered such phenomena too frequently.

Before long, an aged voice resonated from Franca's mirror, its cadence accompanied by the gentle rush of water.

"A bona fide mummy, albeit not ancient in origin."

Franca's gaze snapped up at Sallent, the proprietor of the mystic potion store.

Sallent offered an awkward smile in return.

"I fibbed earlier. This mummy isn't a relic from five centuries past. Truth be told, it was crafted just a fortnight ago and dispatched here. However, regardless of origin, it underwent a comprehensive and protracted mummification process. The sole disparity from ancient mummies is the brevity of its interment."

An "ancient" mummy born a mere fortnight prior? Lumian quirked an eyebrow at Sallent, his tone casual. "Do you hunt down the living to fashion mummies?"

Sallent gently shook his head.

"No need for such methods. The Southern Continent witnesses countless daily deaths. Procuring fresh cadavers requires only a nominal fee. Hiring hunters to track and capture would entail far greater expenses. Undertaking the task personally would exact an exorbitant temporal toll."

He involuntarily assessed the advantages and drawbacks of multiple strategies.

Post this explanation, Jenna regarded the mummy with a newfound perspective.

It was the body of someone who hadn't long been dead.

His motionless form stood exhibited as a tradable commodity.

Though the two-week-old mummy served its purpose and met the requisites, Franca yearned for superior specimens.

With a sigh, she averted her gaze from the recently minted mummy, prompting Sallent with a question. "Are there older mummies available?"

Sallent hesitated momentarily before treading cautiously. "How about those from last year?"

This constituted the most "ancient" mummy within the basement.

Franca emitted a rueful sigh. "That works too."

Less enthused, Sallent led the trio to another sepulcher.

Initially presuming Lumian and his companions intended to purchase an entire mummy, Sallent had showcased the most well-preserved specimen. Now, it seemed Lumian merely sought a segment.

The yellowish-brown mummy dating back to the prior year already displayed signs of fragmentation. Not only were lower extremities absent, but its chest and abdomen also sported gaping voids.

With Franca's divination validating its authenticity, Sallent posed his inquiry with diminished enthusiasm. "How much do you require?"

"50 grams," Franca responded, intending to amass a larger reserve.

Sallent mulled over the request before pronouncing, "500 verl d'or."

Promptly, Franca remitted the payment, her eyes fixed as Sallent procured a hammer and dirk, employing them to sever a portion of the mummy's arm, akin to extracting ore.

Jenna stood dumbfounded. To her, it seemed somewhat gruesome and brutal.

Though she'd witnessed mob fights and personally taken a life, she'd never encountered someone treating human remains as inexpensive commodities.

Internally, Franca sighed and suppressed her emotions.

This was the stark reality of the Beyonder world and its potion system, yet compared to the boons, it was strangely appealing.

With the fraction of a mummy's arm now in her possession, Franca wordlessly led Jenna out of the tomb, trailed by Lumian and Sallent.

They had traversed scarcely three meters when the kerosene lamps lining the corridor receded, casting an eerie dimness.

Sallent swiveled his head, his demeanor a mix of surprise and uncertainty.

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Chapter 321 - 321 Compensation

321 Compensation

In the dim corridor, despite the unchanging temperature, an icy gust swept through, sending shivers down the spine.

His initial urge was to reach into his pocket and grasp Mr. K's finger. Yet, he held back, mindful of the unfamiliar territory that was the Southern Continent. Mr. K might not sense the use of his finger, so Lumian suppressed his instinct.

Franca reacted swiftly too. A small mirror materialized in her palm. Jenna, less experienced, didn't grasp the scene's significance, but her instincts told her it wasn't a positive development.

It was akin to the spooky tales told in bar dance halls to frighten young girls!

Sallent, avoiding the dim oil lamp's gaze, briskly moved past Jenna and Franca, making a beeline for the pitch-black wooden door to the basement. He paid Lumian no attention.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Sounds of impact echoed from the tombs on either side. It wasn't clear if sarcophagus lids had been struck or heavy stone doors pounded.

Sallent's expression shifted, and he bolted out.

In the silent basement, the echoes of the pounding lingered. Lumian and the others hurried after the mystic potion store owner, easily overtaking him.

At that very moment, the pitch-black wooden door creaked shut abruptly.

Seeing this, Franca sprinted forward and flung the mirror out the door.

A resonant crack marked the mirror's collision with the wooden door, fragments scattering across the floor.

Lumian and Franca came to a halt simultaneously, their attention on Sallent. Jenna, still in motion, comprehended and made the same choice.

In the eerily dim corridor, Sallent, decked in a blue coat with gold accents, stood frozen, his pale face tinged with a sickly green hue.

The pounding from the tombs persisted, its reverberations shaking everyone present to the core.

Sallent trembled visibly, muttering to himself, “We’re done for. We’re all finished…”

Franca inquired swiftly yet composedly, “What’s going on?”

Only by grasping the core issue could she devise a swift and effective strategy!

Seemingly detached from his own senses, Sallent didn’t answer. He half-mumbled, “We’re done for. We’re all finished…”

Before he could complete his thought, the entire basement quivered.

The dark-green flames that had shrunk to the size of rice grains flickered noticeably in the same direction.

“It’s awake! It’s awake!”

Sallent remained unresponsive, repeating his panicked cry, “It’s awake! It’s awake!”

Seeing that the mystic potion store owner was clearly in a state of extreme horror and not in his right mind, Franca decisively abandoned her attempts to ask him for information and took out a mirror.

Her plan was to use Magic Mirror Divination to swiftly assess the current situation.

Even if the divination’s response wasn’t crystal clear and required interpretation, it was still better than being completely clueless!

In a matter of moments, Franca completed the incantation and witnessed an aqueous light emanating from the mirror.

Just as she was preparing to gather her thoughts and formulate appropriate questions to obtain corresponding answers, Lumian, who had been standing silently beside her, suddenly spoke up. “Did it work?”

“It did. I can perform the divination,” Franca cooperatively responded, although she was puzzled by Lumian’s actions.

Lumian immediately broke into a grin.

“No need for questions.”

Uh… Franca was caught off guard before she grasped Lumian’s intention.

Just then, the basement shook once more. Sallent, the mystic potion store owner, was so overcome with fear that his voice turned high-pitched.

“It’s here! It’s here!

“We’re going to die!”

In the next heartbeat, Lumian seized his shoulder.

Simultaneously, Lumian firmly held Jenna’s arm with his other hand, while Franca hooked her arm around his shoulder like a bro.

An eerie light shimmered through the crevices of their clothing, and the four of them materialized outside the basement, standing before the pitch-black wooden door adorned with intricate and enigmatic symbols.

“It’s here! It’s here!

“We’re going to die!”

Sallent’s cries of despair still echoed in the air.

Lumian cast an appraising glance at the mystic potion store owner, pondering whether to utilize the Niese Face to transform into a mummy and give him a scare.

Therapeutic provocation had its merits too!

However, considering his waning spirituality and the prudence of revealing too many abilities to a stranger, Lumian ultimately shelved the prank idea.

Jenna swung her right palm, delivering a resounding slap to Sallent’s face, leaving him bewildered. He gazed at the woman before him, utterly perplexed.

Franca and Lumian exchanged speechless glances, unsure how to react to this unexpected turn of events.

As the pitch-black door and the basement walls swayed gently, the cacophony outside abruptly subsided.

Jenna felt the weight of their gazes and mumbled, “Isn’t this how they wake them up? That’s how they would bring back my neighbor when she lost control of her emotions.”

It wasn’t madness. In the factory district, people had their own practical remedies. More often than not, they did the trick, though occasionally they proved ineffective.

Of course, if he were part of her family, she wouldn’t dare try it. She’d seek professional assistance instead.

Franca snapped out of her reverie and commended sincerely, “Well done.”

Several moments elapsed, and Sallent’s gaze cleared.

Instinctively, he scanned their surroundings and exclaimed in surprise, “We’re outside? When did we get out?”

“When you were screaming ‘we’re going to die,’ ‘we’re going to die,’” Lumian retorted with an annoying tone.

He then raised an eyebrow and inquired with a deep intonation, “Who were you saying was about to wake up?”

Sallent’s expression shifted multiple times before he stammered, “A genuine ancient mummy. It slumbers deep within the tomb and occasionally stirs. It only woke up a few days ago. Why did it wake up so quickly…”

Normally, there was a rough timeframe for how long the mummy remained “awake.” According to Sallent’s experience, it would be at least another month before it awoke again. That was why he dared to bring Lumian and the others into the basement.

Unexpectedly, an accident occurred!

What caused the ancient mummy to awaken prematurely? Lumian directed a thoughtful gaze at Franca, as if silently asking her if she wished to consider obtaining the genuine ancient mummy.

Franca comprehended his inquiry and shook her head, indicating that it wasn’t necessary.

The mummy’s ashes were merely supplementary ingredients. The ones formed the year before were still usable. There was no need to risk dealing with what seemed to be a perilous entity.

Lumian withdrew his gaze and pushed through the headache gnawing at his temples. He turned to Sallent and grinned.

“I don’t care if it’s last year’s mummy or an ancient one awakening. There are two things I know for sure.

“First, I saved your life. Second, we were scared out of our wits and nearly met our end down there.

“So, you owe me a thank-you present and compensation for the mental strain. How much do you think is fair? Keep in mind, I only want gold.”

With the memory of owing the Armored Shadow and Mr. Fool a total of 100,000 verl d’or in gold, Lumian was keen on seizing every opportunity to amass funds.

As the tumult behind the pitch-black wooden door gradually settled, Sallent heaved a sigh of relief and responded, “How about 1,000 verl d’or? That’s all the gold I have on hand.”

His heart ached at the thought of parting with the money, but he acknowledged Lumian’s point. Without their intervention, he’d have met his end in that basement, becoming fodder for the mummy.

Moreover, the group had demonstrated significant prowess. Rejecting their request outright seemed like a risky proposition.

“Agreed.” Lumian didn’t push for more or attempt to haggle.

As the quartet made their way toward the stairs leading to the warehouse, Franca lowered her left hand and surreptitiously let something slip into the shadowy corner.

After obtaining 1,000 verl d’or in gold coins, gold nuggets, and jewelry, Lumian, Franca, and Jenna exited the Highland Mystic Potion Shop.

Franca glanced back at the shop and let out a wry chuckle. “Tsk, all this trouble, and we ended up with a mummy’s hand and an additional 500 verl d’or.”

Without waiting for Lumian’s response, she queried with a grin, “Are you running short on funds again? You used to save people without expecting payment. They could give it or not.”

“Have you switched to the Spectator’s Pathway?” Lumian teased, nodding in agreement. “The special contract I mentioned involves sacrificing 100,000 verl d’or worth of gold within a set timeframe after the pact is made.”

100,000 verl d’or? Jenna’s understanding of monetary matters had undergone quite a transformation since entering the world of mysticism.

Based on what she knew, even someone like Ciel didn’t possess as much liquid wealth as her. Yet, he dared to accumulate a debt of 100,000 verl d’or just for a contract granting access to those special abilities.

Franca clicked her tongue and inquired, “Why didn’t you ‘teleport’ us right to the door from the start? The basement door wasn’t closed then, so no mishaps would have occurred.”

“Don’t you think it’s more dramatic to do it at the last moment?” Lumian retorted with a question.

Naturally, the actual reason was that he had recently gained the ability to traverse the spirit world and hadn’t ingrained a reflex to use it. When the pitch-black wooden door in the basement shut, he had been hesitant to attempt teleporting for fear of it failing.

Later, Franca successfully completed her Magic Mirror Divination. Through it, Lumian confirmed his ability to remain connected to the outside world within the seal, which allowed him to make the definitive teleportation.

Amid Franca and Jenna's baffled expressions, Lumian massaged his aching head and announced, "Let's find an inn. I need to rest and restore my spirituality."

"Okay." Franca wasn't in a hurry to secure an inn. Instead, she turned into an empty alley and produced an ornate makeup mirror.

"Why are you using divination?" Jenna queried inquisitively.

Franca's lips curled into a smile.

"I'm using it to divine the reflection in my other mirror."

Seeing Jenna's perplexity, she elucidated, "I left a small mirror that looks like a shard outside that basement."

With that, Franca caressed the mirror and chanted an incantation.

Before long, the mirror projected an image: Sallent, the mystic potion store proprietor, stood before the pitch-black wooden door, his posture hunched as he cried out, "Only death endures forever!"

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Chapter 322 - 322 Pleasure

322 Pleasure

“Only death endures forever?”

Lumian and Jenna struggled to grasp the gravity of the situation unfolding before them. Their attention turned towards Franca.

Franca observed as Sallent bowed and offered his prayers before departing from the dimly lit basement. The mirror’s enigmatic display dissolved into darkness, marking the end of the divination. She spoke contemplatively, “He seems to be from the Numinous Episcopate.”

Numinous Episcopate? Lumian, who had encountered references to this secret organization within Aurore’s grimoires, knew that it originated from the royal lineage of the Balam Empire on the Southern Continent and ancient Death believers. The organization’s mission seemed to involve awakening or reviving Death while expelling colonists to restore the Balam Empire to its former glory.

Aurore’s knowledge of the Numinous Episcopate was somewhat superficial, lacking details about prominent figures, rituals, or specific practices.

“The Numinous Episcopate?” Jenna’s lack of familiarity was apparent in her voice.

Franca proceeded to provide a succinct overview of the Numinous Episcopate’s background, aligning with Lumian’s understanding.

She concluded, “In the Southern Continent, the Numinous Episcopate holds a comparable status to the Rose School of Thought. Although they don’t resort to blood sacrifices or terrorism like some secret faith-based organizations, rituals are inherent to their nature. The Numinous Episcopate’s pursuit of death’s revival necessitates sacrificial rites.”

“Right, the Numinous Episcopate’s leader is a demigod nicknamed Pale Empress.”

Pale Empress? Given the Numinous Episcopate’s similarity in strength to the Rose School of Thought, it’s plausible that Pale Empress is an angel… Lumian rubbed his head, lacking the energy to analyze further.

Jenna’s gaze shifted toward the Highland Mystic Potion shop, her confusion evident.

“Why would the shop owner, an Intisian, join the Numinous Episcopate?”

The Numinous Episcopate's goal was to eradicate colonists and rebuild the Balam Empire. Intis was one of the colonial powers established in West Balam.

Sallent, though having lived in the Southern Continent for over a decade and reaping the rewards of being an Intisian, found himself in a puzzling predicament. His allegiance to the Numinous Episcopate, despite these benefits, raised questions. Sallent wasn't one of the lowest-class denizens of Trier like Jenna who didn't have a clear concept of colonial interests.

Franca muttered, "Who knows? Numerous possibilities exist. Enforced conversion after being captured, manipulation by mysterious forces, gradual enticement with escalating benefits leading to devout belief, or a transformative experience thanks to being rescued by a kind Death believer.

"In any case, the Numinous Episcopate displays cunning by employing a genuine Northern Continent native to operate a mystical potion shop, peddle mummies, and act as an inconspicuous spy. Their strategy appears well-orchestrated, defying easy suspicion."

Observing Lumian's weariness, Franca decided to not delve further. She located a nearby inn and secured lodgings for them.

Upon Lumian's awakening, sunlight streamed through the glass window, casting a warm glow on Franca and Jenna, who were seated at the table. The sky was serene, adorned with fluffy clouds resembling wisps of cotton.

Franca and Jenna savored a burrito seasoned with spices, enveloping succulent beef and mutton, while Lumian indulged in a plate of roasted onions, potatoes, corn, and assorted meats. A sweet corn-based beverage graced their table, emanating a delightful aroma.

As Lumian sat up, a chuckle escaped his lips. "Looks like you two had quite the time."

Munching on her food, Franca mumbled, "I don't often venture to the Star Highlands, and I accomplished what I set out to do. Naturally, it's time to unwind.

"What's this called? It's called… Dammit, forget it. You get the idea!"

Despite a prolonged attempt, Franca struggled to articulate her thoughts in the appropriate language. Eventually, she abandoned the effort, prioritizing her meal.

Jenna gestured to her right. "We brought you some lunch."

A strip of fried beef, coated with a crimson sauce exuding a subtle alcoholic aroma, lay before Lumian.

"I figured you might be hesitant to venture out due to the language barrier," Lumian admitted, promptly satisfying his hunger.

He had previously realized that only a minority of the locals understood Intisian, and even then, only on a basic level for rudimentary communication.

Franca, swallowing a bite of burrito, sipped on a cup of steaming corn juice.

“Body language is universal.”

Jenna added with a grin, “Franca’s gestures are truly something to behold. She even mimics pig squeals, cow moos, and sheep bleats to communicate her meat preferences to vendors unfamiliar with Intisian. Yet, the nobles here are a departure from my expectations. They appear more akin to Northern Continent counterparts than their Southern Continent peers.”

In this relaxed ambiance, the trio enjoyed a leisurely lunch, recounting their escapades as if they were on an authentic holiday.

…

Under the cover of night, within the Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman district, nestled at Rist docks, an abandoned building stood—a site Lumian had previously set ablaze.

Cognizant of the potential disturbances that advancements within an apartment might trigger among nearby residents, Franca heeded Lumian’s advice and selected this vacant location.

Promptly erecting a wall of spirituality, Franca collected the ashes of the incinerated mummy—thanks to Lumian—along with the other requisite ingredients.

Meanwhile, Lumian and Jenna maintained a careful distance, intently observing as Franca adroitly mixed the ingredients and consumed the potion.

A brief hush enveloped the scene, then Franca’s visage twisted in anguish.

Almost instantly, her flaxen hair, formerly bound in a ponytail, broke free of its constraints. Propelled by an invisible force, the hair drifted and extended, resembling a radiant web expanding in all directions.

More ethereal strands emerged, dense and elongated. Swiftly, they populated the space embraced by the wall of spirituality, fashioning a spectral woodland of filaments.

Once again, Jenna bore witness to the mystifying and surreal attributes of the potion,

while obscured by the burgeoning hair. Alongside Lumian, she patiently awaited the anomaly to subside.

Whether this passage of time spanned dozens of seconds or stretched beyond two minutes, the ethereal flaxen hair finally withdrew, returning to Franca's form.

With a jubilant countenance, Franca pivoted to face her companions, her limpid eyes radiating contentment.

"Everything went quite seamlessly. I'm anticipating future advancements to be quite cumbersome and challenging."

Curiously, Jenna found Franca's flowery blouse and off-white breeches harmonizing impeccably with her demeanor for the first time. The attire seemed to accentuate an ineffable allure, evoking a blush and a warmth in Jenna's ears, despite her own femininity. On the other hand, Lumian experienced an unfamiliar and unwanted warmth and reaction.

As Franca acclimated to the powers of the Demoness of Pleasure, Lumian and Jenna's racing hearts eventually steadied, restoring a semblance of normality.

Concluding their task and dismantling the spiritual barrier, Franca rejoined them, sporting a radiant smile. Her eyes shimmered akin to a lake glinting with reflected light.

"How much of an improvement are we talking about?" Lumian posed a direct question.

A rough comprehension of the situation would facilitate better teamwork!

Franca's eyes danced playfully as she responded, a grin adorning her face. "Take a guess."

"I'm not a Demoness. How can I guess?" Lumian's retort barely left his lips before he frowned.

An intangible force had coiled around his legs and body!

Then, with a sudden rush, Lumian's form was engulfed in crimson flames that erupted from within him, engulfing the enigmatic threads.

Only now did Lumian and Jenna perceive the intangible tendrils, tinted in fiery hues resembling translucent spider silk.

Amidst her amusement, Franca inquired of Lumian and Jenna with a mischievous glint, "Do you understand now? Perhaps you'd like to explore another?"

"No!"

"No need."

In unison, Jenna and Lumian retorted, their voices echoing their apprehension.

Franca maintained her smile, suggesting, “Are you truly certain you don’t wish to give it a try? I assure you, a mere touch can envelop you in true pleasure.”

“Dammit!” Jenna instinctively retreated a step, her expletive punctuating her reaction.

Lumian regarded Franca, grappling with whether she was indeed teasing him or harboring some genuine intent.

Yes, the target should be Jenna… I can’t rule out the possibility of using simple contact to embarrass me… As Lumian’s thoughts raced, Franca suddenly composed herself and said seriously, “In addition to the two I mentioned earlier, my proficiency in Black Fire, Frost, Curse, and Mirror magic has all been elevated. Their integration has expanded as well. For instance, I can utilize a mirror to focus on a target and employ Black Fire to enact a curse. Another scenario involves my utilization of Mirror Substitution and Staff Substitution to counteract fatal harm while gaining some measure of recuperation.

“My capabilities as an Assassin and Instigator have also been enhanced.”

She succinctly summarized her advancements without delving into particulars.

Lumian nodded, mulling over Franca’s capabilities. He inquired thoughtfully, “Do you possess a charm-like ability too?”

Franca’s smile hinted at an answer, but she chose to remain silent.

Jenna observed Franca for a moment and then noted something else, pointing at her and remarking, “You’ve become even more beautiful!”

Franca’s individual features and overall appearance had transcended any imperfections. Her demeanor radiated an undeniable brilliance—a striking, flamboyant beauty that demanded no disguise.

“Is that so?” Franca responded, her surprise evident.

Lumian couldn’t resist stroking his chin, pondering whether Madame Hidden Blade would genuinely switch to Iron-blooded Knight when going from Sequence 5 to Sequence 4.

As Lumian bade Franca and Jenna farewell and embarked on his return to Auberge du Coq Doré, a sudden realization swept over him. He lowered his voice and inquired, “Temiboros, what’s the next boon after Contractee?”

Yet, Termiboros remained silent, offering no reply.

Lumian let out a scoff.

“It’s fine. Once I locate the padre, he’ll divulge the information.”

Although his confidence might waver internally, maintaining an outward appearance of assurance was essential in times like these.

…

The day of the prophesied event arrived swiftly.

In Quartier de la Princesse Rouge, at the crossroads of Rue de la Muraille and Rue du Cheval Blanc, Lumian disembarked from a public carriage with a casual grace. Clad in a white shirt, a black vest, brown trousers, and sleek leather shoes, he cast his gaze upon the slumbering neighborhood that lay ahead.

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Chapter 323 - 323 Psychological Profile

323 Psychological Profile

Lumian stood at an intersection, his hands casually tucked into his pockets as he strolled leisurely toward Rue de la Muraille.

This street held more significance to the people of Trier than even the renowned Avenue du Boulevard. It was their aspiration.

In the days before Emperor Roselle ignited the Industrial Revolution, Trier's cityscape hadn't sprawled to the extent it had now. It nestled in the easternmost corner, fortified by stout city walls and vigilantly guarded by soldiers. Their military encampment wasn't distant, which prompted the emergence of numerous brothels and prostitutes nearby.

As the sands of time sifted through, Rue de la Muraille garnered its reputation, and Trier's population burgeoned. A modest market burgeoned into a realm of prestige and extravagance that stretched across the Northern and Southern Continents.

Lumian passed beneath the sheltering canopy of Intis parasol trees, his gaze taking in opulent palace-like structures alongside unassuming apartments. They all shared a common trait—windows adorned with frosted glass and the occasional green shutter.

Rue de la Muraille appeared to be rousing from its midday slumber. The road hosted few pedestrians, but each one bore a distinct air. Some dashed by in somber gray-blue work attire, driven by haste, while others donned antiquated finery. They glanced around before slipping into apartment complexes. Cameras slung around necks captured candid moments before these wanderers vanished into ornate edifices. Attempts at projecting an Intisian facade couldn't mask true identities, betrayed by hairlines and exaggerated heights.

Moreover, Lumian's keen eye caught sight of an iron-gray robot, towering at two meters. A steam-spewing outlet adorned its back, accompanied by gears, torsion springs, screws, and bent pipes—a symphony of decorative mechanics.

Perched on the robot's left shoulder, a lavishly dressed man flaunted intricate makeup. His leisurely observation spanned pedestrians, dignitaries shrouded in gold or silver masks, and groggy men stumbling into wakefulness.

Here, the ordinary and elite intertwined in a peculiar harmony.

As Lumian advanced, he methodically surveyed his surroundings, his gaze unrelenting in its pursuit of his target.

In a flash, he spotted Albus approaching from a side alley.

The Iron and Blood Cross Order member, sporting dark-red locks, acknowledged Lumian with a sly grin. He lifted his right hand, pointed at his own head—provocation in motion.

Under Gardner Martin's directive, Albus was tasked with tracking down Padre Guillaume Bénet. It seemed Albus was insinuating a competition of sorts, pitting Lumian against himself to see who'd uncover the "prey" first.

Beyond Albus, the Iron and Blood Cross Order likely deployed several official or peripheral affiliates. In this, Gardner Martin had kept his promises.

Undeterred by Albus's gesture, Lumian pressed on, deeper into Rue de la Muraille.

Guided by the revelations of Demoness of Pleasure Franca's Magic Mirror Divination, the prophecy's domain narrowed:

Guillaume Bénet's presence was expected on five streets, including Rue de la Muraille and Rue du Cheval Blanc, within the week.

However, Rue de la Muraille's length, its expanse, and the thronging populace created a nebulous landscape for Lumian's quest. Carpet searches and widespread net-casting was virtually impossible. Success hinged on the possibility of enlisting aid from the authorities and mustering an army to seal off this domain, vigilantly guarding every entrance to Underground Trier.

Previously, Lumian could only hope that the Iron and Blood Cross Order, a secret organization teeming with formidable Hunters, boasted superior tracking and manhunt techniques. Or perhaps, Termiboros—an Inevitability angel—might drive them to converge. As long as the distance between Lumian and Guillaume Bénet was moderate, they would "reunite" as though preordained.

However, a new trail had emerged.

This advancement was predominantly the fruit of the mystical knowledge he had acquired as a Contractee!

Within this trove of knowledge lay a menagerie of uncanny creatures, summonable or recruitable, complete with the requisite costs for forging contracts. The compendium detailed the abilities obtainable and the subsequent penalties incurred post-contract.

Merging the exhibition of Guillaume Bénet's contractual capabilities from his memory and dream, Lumian pieced together a fragment of insight:

Summoning Abyss Demon Flowers necessitates a sacrifice of fresh human blood. The downside—an increased desire for coitus.

Invisibility mandates thirteen portions of prepared meat. The downside—an intensified susceptibility to hunger.

Slow Flight sacrifices one's romantic infatuation perpetually. The downside—an urge to show off.

Bone Curse predicates the sacrifice of a living person. The downside—drowsiness.

The Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell exacts no fewer than three human souls. The downside—random bouts of dizziness, numbering four to five daily.

Internal Explosion demands the sacrifice of any Beyonder characteristic. The downside—unrelenting spirituality drain, tantamount to permanent reduction of spirituality capacity.

From the detailed description of the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, Lumian conjectured that the padre had inadvertently met an additional, covert cost.

That was his name!

The Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell affected the target's Spirit Body by invocating their true name, causing them to experience dizziness and other reactions, amplified by deeper comprehension of the target and employment of verbiage echoing the spirit world.

In contracting with a spirit world entity armed with the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, Guillaume Bénet inadvertently disclosed his true name. Entities endowed with such powers could wield a person's true name for manifold feats—a potentially profound latent hazard.

This clandestine peril was merely one amid numerous akin enigmas housed within a Contractee's mystic wisdom. Therefore, Lumian opted for an extensive screen of spirit world creatures, personal interaction followed by experimental engagement.

Based upon the known downsides accompanying the contracted abilities, Lumian hatched an educated hypothesis.

After Guillaume Bénet, a man driven by insatiable desires, found his appetite for sex surging, he had definitely sought out women. The prophecy's alignment with Quartier de la Princesse Rouge harmonized with the results unearthed from the Magic Mirror Divination about the five nearby streets.

Furthermore, he found his hunger more voracious than ever, and the act of intimacy left him drained of vigor. Thus, the likelihood was high that he would gravitate towards a brothel that catered to both carnal and culinary needs or invite a woman back home.

Guillaume Bénet was not only a man of fervent desires but also an ambitious soul, thirsting for power. Being confined in the village and before the contractual abilities imbued his life with adverse effects, his lust mirrored an expression of power. Otherwise, it was impossible to explain how his desires sprawled across every woman, an inclination spanning the spectrum between esteemed paramours and those of lesser stature.

To him, appropriating the companions of other men became a testament to his standing, might, and allure.

Stepping onto Trier's soil, a place where his provincial accent drew disdain from the citizens, he undoubtedly sought vindication, manifesting his claims in his own unique manner.

Fused with his relentless pursuit of strength and his past style, Guillaume Bénet very likely went after sought-after courtesans, stoking the fires of envy amongst the local denizens. He might even spirit one or two of these coveted women away to grace his home.

This comprehensive analysis of the padre's character and psyche wasn't Lumian's solitary undertaking. Rather, it emerged from the expertise of Anthony Reid, a Psychiatrist. Armed with Lumian's intricate portrayal of Guillaume Bénet, Reid painted a psychological canvas, a vivid portrait of this heretic's inner workings.

Thus, two distinct paths unfurled to ensnare his prey. The first entailed staking out upscale brothels, where both meals and famous courtesans awaited. The other trail veered towards investigations surrounding courtesans who had entered matrimony, taken on mistress roles, or even vanished within the past two months.

For the former pursuit, the mantle rested upon the shoulders of the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Lumian's current task revolved around unearthing a conduit to intelligence about Rue de la Muraille's clandestine tales.

Anthony Reid, an adept intelligence broker, held a key. He was well-acquainted with Bühler, a Ghost Face columnist renowned for exposing scandals and whispers that wove through the fabric of Rue de la Muraille.

Bühler, a connoisseur of drinking and writing, would frequent a corner of Hope Café where he could survey the entrance before venturing into the brothels.

With his objective clear, Lumian embarked on a steady stride toward the café nestled amidst Rue de la Muraille.

En route, he revisited the entirety of the task at hand, stirred by an indescribable emotion.

His divination capabilities paled in comparison to Franca's. A lone Prophecy Spell rested in his arsenal, a tool he dared not wield recklessly. The finesse of Anthony Reid's psychological profiling and information-gathering expertise dwarfed Lumian's own. However, mobilizing these allies allowed him to harness these

strengths, akin to gaining possession of these abilities.

Lumian couldn't foretell the ramifications of ascending to godhood. Yet, one thing was certain: beneath Sequence 4, one's prowess met constraints. Cooperative squads harnessed the potential for synergy, enabling them to confront even higher Sequences sans those with godhood.

Soon, Lumian caught sight of Hope Café, its entrance adorned in a milky-white veneer.

After pushing open the heavy door, he cast his gaze upon the corner granting anyone a vantage point.

A slender-faced man in his thirties, his ebony hair framing azure eyes, his beard trimmed meticulously and waxed to precision, met Lumian's gaze—his attention fixated on the entrance.

Sensing Lumian's scrutiny, the man's visage transformed. He reached for the soft-covered notebook and crimson fountain pen upon the table, on the verge of vanishing through the back door.

In response, Lumian drew his revolver and dispatched a shot toward the café's rear exit.

With a resounding bang, the bullet embedded itself into the wood.

The café's patrons were jolted into alarm, their reactions oscillating between concealment and inquiry, engendering chaos.

The bearded man stood immobilized, neither sure if he should run or stay.

Under the collective gaze of bartender, patrons, and staff, Lumian advanced toward his target, revolver in hand, amusement playing across his features.

"Are you Monsieur Bühler?"

"Yes, that's me." Bühler forced a smile.

Lumian gestured toward Bühler's original seat and spoke nonchalantly,

"Take a seat. I've come to purchase information."

A sigh of relief escaped Bühler as he hunched, retracing his steps to settle into the chair.

Lumian occupied the opposite seat, putting down his revolver. With a trace of playfulness, he queried, "Why the preference for such a dim corner?"

Bühler sighed and said, "In my line of work, reprisals are a constant concern. You're well aware that some individuals detest seeing their names or likenesses entangled in the web of scandals across newspapers and periodicals.

“This corner grants me an unobstructed view of the entrance, affording early detection of any potential troublemakers. And, should the need arise, I can effect a swift escape through the back.”

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Chapter 324 - 324 Which Is True and Which Is False

324 Which Is True and Which Is False

After a brief mention of the reason for selecting his seat, Bühler glanced up at Lumian, a self-deprecating smile on his lips.

“I didn’t expect you to open fire so quickly.”

Lumian’s hand rested casually on the revolver by his side as he offered a faint smile in return.

“It seems the folks you’ve encountered before are law-abiding citizens.”

Bühler’s instincts, honed from past experiences of being beaten, urged him to retort. But as he compared Lumian’s demeanor with those of his previous encounters, he found a strange logic in the man’s words.

Thanks to the shelter of the law, he, a columnist for Ghost Face, had managed to survive up to this point!

“Are you not afraid of attracting the police?” Bühler turned to look at the waiter, who dared not approach with the menu and drink list. “Firing a gun in a place like this isn’t a minor incident. Someone should have already alerted the authorities.”

Lumian chuckled.

“That’s why we have to hurry.”

His words punctuated by deliberate actions, Lumian picked up his revolver, rotated the cylinder, and slotted a yellow cartridge into the empty chamber, right before Bühler’s eyes.

“I want to know which courtesans have left Rue de la Muraille, this haven of extravagance, in the last two months,” Lumian inquired with a calm resolve.

Instinctively, Bühler shook his head. “They aren’t true courtesans. Those women possess their lavish residences and permanent paramours. They frequent high society, wielding influence over industries and policies with their words alone. This place merely acts as a reserve for courtesans.”

“I’m only interested in those who fit my description.” Lumian dismissed the specifics of courtesanship.

Bühler's gaze flickered between the revolver in Lumian's grip and said, recollecting,

"Four of them. Lil' Jort wed a Loen merchant and relocated to Backlund. 'White Vase' Sophie became the lover of Member of Parliament Batis, attending high society banquets and salons. She had a chance of becoming a true courtesan. 'Dew Rose' Mary fell victim to mental illness and mutilated her face with scissors one morning. She's confined to an asylum. 'Condiment Beauty' Paulina vanished from Rue de la Muraille without a trace, as though whisked away by someone of status."

As Bühler recounted, he noticed the dashing figure before him, ready to fire at the slightest provocation, producing a post-it note and a fountain pen, meticulously jotting down notes.

Swallowing unease, he continued, "I encountered Paulina on Rue Vincent not long ago. She seemed well off, with a four-wheeled carriage, a maid, a valet, and even a butler.

"Sadly, I had pressing matters then and failed to determine her place of residence."

Rue Vincent… Lumian's memory jogged. It was one of the five streets Franca had divined. Farthest from Rue de la Muraille, it exuded a quieter, upscale aura.

Based on Bühler's account, he suspected Paulina had become Guillaume Bénet's paramour.

For a fugitive, a prospective courtesan proved a safer choice than frequenting Rue de la Muraille. Guillaume Bénet was intelligent and capable. His present yearnings for intimacy and his voracious hunger hadn't rendered him a mindless imbecile. He would surely opt for a less risky strategy.

Just then, hurried footsteps resonated outside the café as three police officers neared the entrance.

Coolly, Lumian donned his dark-blue cap, stashed his note and pen, and slid 50 verl d'or notes onto the table before Bühler.

With these tasks accomplished, he reclaimed his revolver, stood up, and proceeded to the café's rear door. Swiftly, he opened it and departed.

Bang!

The police officers burst into Hope Café through its main entrance.

…

On the elegant street of Rue Vincent, stately villa-like houses adorned both sides of the road. The road was wide and well-kept, with only occasional pedestrians and carriages passing through.

After Lumian turned into the street, he found himself at a loss.

He couldn't infiltrate every house and search every room, could he?

Besides, he wasn't the most suitable candidate for this kind of investigation. Franca would be better suited for it, but involving her was risky.

After a brief contemplation, Lumian allowed a smile to grace his features. He strolled toward one of the houses and pressed the doorbell.

A young valet opened the dark-brown door. His appearance suggested no trace of Southern Continent lineage, and he gazed at Lumian in bewilderment. In a clear Trierien accent, he inquired,

"Sir, how may I assist you?"

With an amiable grin, Lumian replied, "I'm here to inquire about the most splendid madam residing on this street."

"…" The valet was momentarily speechless. This was the first instance he'd encountered someone seeking such peculiar information.

Or perhaps not. While such matters were whispered about behind closed doors and boasted about in taverns, there were occasionally individuals who exhibited curiosity about such affairs. However, who would approach a stranger's door in the sweltering sun to inquire?

What was this person up to?

Before the valet could react, Lumian produced a 10 verl d'or note and offered it with a genial demeanor.

The valet's eyelids twitched. He hesitated for a moment before accepting the payment.

He suspected this young man to be a counterfeit Dandyist, specialized in duping affluent ladies of their bodies and riches. The appearance and conduct matched the descriptions found in newspapers.

However, if the lady wasn't the valet's mistress or lady, why refuse the reward?

When the stranger acquired what he sought, a certain madam would also receive some gratification!

The valet cast a furtive glance around before lowering his voice.

"The lady in Unit 50 is exquisitely beautiful. A genuine Trierien, she married a foreigner from the southern lands. That accent…"

As the valet spoke, he shook his head with a mixture of indignation and scorn, as if he had harbored this sentiment for some time.

Lumian's smile broadened.

Indeed, under the sway of his burgeoning impulses, the padre couldn't resist sharing his prize with the neighbors—a stunning Trierien courtesan.

He might not host grand banquets or waltz to proclaim his conquest, nor would he escort his lover for a public appearance. Nonetheless, he would inevitably find subtle ways to make his neighbors aware that even foreigners could possess resplendent courtesans as mistresses.

At times like this, Guillaume Bénet had to exercise prudence in disguising himself. However, his mistress's beauty wasn't something easily concealed. She might even meticulously dress herself to exhibit her remarkable presence.

Of course, Lumian couldn't be certain if the lady was Paulina, the presumed mistress. Yet, the gradual collection of anticipated information through bold assumptions and careful confirmation made him feel he was steadily closing in on Guillaume Bénet.

Beyond the gates of 50 Rue Vincent, Lumian glanced at the facade as an ordinary passerby might.

The three-story beige structure stood before him, surrounded by a lush green lawn and a garden vibrant with colors. A gardener tended to the greenery, offering a partial view.

Lumian promptly averted his gaze from the building's pillar, wary that prolonged observation could arouse suspicion.

As for any possibility of being recognized by the padre, Lumian held no concern. Prior to setting out, he had employed Niese Face to alter his appearance and communicated to his companions that it was due to cosmetics.

Lumian's striking appearance—a fusion of golden and black hair—could be anyone's. As long as Guillaume Bénet lacked the ability to penetrate the illusion or actively employ it, it was unlikely he'd realize his pursuer had infiltrated the vicinity.

Lumian's current plan was to leave Rue Vincent and switch places with Jenna or Franca. He would then ensconce himself in the shadows across from Unit 50, patiently observing until all suspicion around the target was dissipated.

He refrained from adopting the guise of a tramp this time, given the scarcity of such individuals on this refined street. While a rare appearance might occur, these transients were promptly shooed away by the household staff.

Just as he prepared to depart from the beige edifice, Lumian turned his head in a casual manner. His gaze alighted on a figure visible through the living room window.

The figure stood at a modest height, barely reaching 1.7 meters. Clad in a dark shirt and black trousers, the person possessed a slightly stocky build. Their nose bore a gentle curve, and their black hair fell in a mid-length cascade.

Lumian's pupils dilated for a fleeting moment before swiftly returning to their normal state.

A wisp of a smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and an invisible fire seemed to ignite in his eyes.

Despite the adept disguise, Lumian would recognize him even if he were reduced to ashes!

It was Guillaume Bénet, the padre of Cordu!

Lumian wrestled to contain his surprise, his gaze steering onward.

Simultaneously, his mind raced as he evaluated the next course of action to undertake.

Before long, he reached the end of Rue Vincent.

At that very juncture, a parrot adorned with green and white feathers took flight from Rue de la Muraille and perched itself on Lumian's shoulder. It chirped excitedly, "We've located the target!"

Located the target? Then who did I just see? Another padre? Lumian was momentarily flabbergasted and perplexed.

Which one was the genuine Guillaume Bénet? Had he erred in judgment, or had the Iron and Blood Cross Order and "Rat" Christo been deceived?

…

Fifteen minutes earlier, at the Dill Brothel on Rue de la Muraille.

Within the annex bar on the first floor, Albus savored his Lanti Proof while discreetly observing the attendants, laborers, and the overseer who managed the establishment.

His assessment encompassed the clientele as well, but it yielded nothing of note. Many concealed their identities by donning assorted masks, making it nearly impossible to unveil their true selves.

Having gained a preliminary insight into the inner workings of the Dill Brothel, Albus seized the chance to make his way toward the washroom. He veered onto

the path leading to the kitchen when an attendant approached, carrying a collection of post-it notes.

This attendant's responsibility encompassed recording the requirements of each room and relaying orders to the kitchen.

Albus, marked by his dark-red hair, advanced and retrieved a handful of glistening coins along with a substantial bundle of banknotes from his pocket.

The attendant's features twisted into a blend of perplexity and intrigue.

Albus smiled and said, "I'm on the hunt for a scoundrel. Uncertain about his guise, I'm merely aware he shares your build and possesses a penchant for consorting with the most celebrated ladies. Post-exertion, he seeks sustenance to satiate his hunger immediately.

"If you're able to furnish me with the relevant particulars, all this is yours."

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Chapter 325 - 325 Visit

325 Visit

The attendant's gaze locked onto the handful of gold coins and the banknotes, their unique ink fragrance captivating his senses. He couldn't help but hold his breath, caught in the allure of the treasure before him.

"A-all of it?" The attendant's voice quivered as he swallowed with difficulty.

With a precise flick of his wrist, Albus tossed a gold coin worth 5 verl d'or into the attendant's waiting palm. A confident smile tugged at his lips as he spoke, "That depends on the value of the information you provide. Rest assured, you'll receive another 20 verl d'or, no matter what."

The attendant gingerly bit the gold coin, stealing a glance back at the path they had traversed. His voice dropped to a hushed tone as he shared, "Just as you surmised, the man from the south, in Room 2 on the sixth floor, frequents the company of the most renowned courtesans. He possesses a penchant for pre-ordering his meals, which we dutifully deliver to his quarters every half hour."

A southerner with a penchant for famous courtesans and a habit of pre-ordered meals. Room 602… Albus wasn't one to skimp on appreciation. He tossed two 10 verl d'or coins, etched with the likeness of a warship, to the attendant.

Seizing the calmness on Rue de la Muraille, Albus covertly ascended to the sixth floor, concealing himself on the balcony at the corridor's far end.

Within mere minutes, the attendant tasked with meal deliveries arrived at Room 602, carried by a steam-powered mechanical elevator. A silver-white metal serving cart accompanied him. Carefully, he pressed the doorbell.

Albus straightened up, aligning his view with Room 602's entrance. His gaze intensified.

The door swung open, revealing a man of slight stature, not exceeding 1.7 meters. His attire comprised a pitch-black half-mask, a crisp white shirt, and pale-hued boxer shorts.

Removing his trousers but leaving his upper attire on… Concealing tattoos, perhaps? The more Albus observed, the stronger his conviction that the occupant of Room 602 matched the likeness of Guillaume Bénet from the wanted posters.

Abstaining from "disturbing" his quarry, Albus settled back into a white-paneled armchair on the balcony. From his pocket emerged a gray-furred rat—one of Beast

Tamer Christo's pets.

Lumian had engaged the services of the "Rat," his abilities allowing easy communication and efficient coordination among team members.

Naturally, Christo served as the intermediary and the "translator."

Albus tenderly patted the rat's head, signaling it with a gesture—a thumb and index finger forming a ring, with the remaining fingers raised.

This signified the discovery of the prime suspect.

With a high-pitched squeak, the rat darted from Albus's grasp, off to find its owner at a nearby tavern.

…

Upon learning from Christo's pet parrot that members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order had located the padre, Lumian found himself plunged into a momentary maelstrom of shock and confusion.

Had they truly found Guillaume Bénet? Then, who did I see?

If the occupant of 50 Rue Vincent is Guillaume Bénet, where did the counterfeit they see come from?

Substitution Spell!

It was one of the five specialized ritualistic magics Lumian had acquired as an Alms Monk. The padre, now a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator, was evidently familiar with it.

This ritual enabled the user to choose another person to inhabit their identity for a period upon sensing impending danger. By gaining the genuine or fake approval of those around them and establishing a strong mystical connection, a ritual could then finalize the switch.

If the Substitution Spell succeeded, the stand-in would be indistinguishable from the original in the eyes of others, although their self-awareness and performance might be compromised to a degree. Nevertheless, their core identity would remain.

When the substitute faced imminent disaster, the one who cast the Substitution Spell could alter their own fate, thus avoiding the impending calamity.

Of course, this hinged on the substitute being kept unaware of the impending danger.

While this ruse could prove effective on other Beyonders, Lumian was well-acquainted with the circumstances surrounding the Substitution Spell. Thus, he couldn't be easily deceived.

For Lumian, the paramount issue at hand was this: Which individual was the true Guillaume Bénet, and which was the substitute?

To deal a decisive blow to the padre and apprehend him with minimal casualties, Lumian needed to consolidate his forces and make a choice. He couldn't attack both entities simultaneously.

Gardner Martin had merely agreed to assist in locating the "prey," without extending further support. Consequently, the majority of individuals dispatched by the Iron and Blood Cross Order were Low-Sequence Beyonders or even regular people.

If Lumian opted to solicit Gardner Martin's aid, it might take hours for the Iron and Blood Cross Order to assemble sufficient reinforcements. Guillaume Bénet didn't possess limitless endurance, and the courtesan wasn't a Demoness of Pleasure who could allow an extended encounter. He would definitely be gone by then.

The question remains: What decision would Guillaume Bénet make? Would he have the substitute remain at the residence to divert danger while he ventured out for personal pursuits? Alternatively, would he dispatch the substitute to showcase his characteristic behavior, drawing danger away from himself? Lumian found both scenarios challenging to dismiss.

After deliberation, his gaze shifted to the green and white parrot. He addressed it, "Locate 'Red Boots' Franca and ask her to divine the authenticity of the Guillaume Bénet at 50 Rue Vincent and the one present here."

The parrot stared at Lumian as if questioning his sanity. "I'm just a parrot."

What I said is too complicated. It can't understand or memorize everything? Lumian swiftly arrived at a decision.

"Guide me to 'Red Boots' Franca. Actually, first lead me to Christo."

Time remained on their side. The individual at 50 Rue Vincent couldn't elude them. The team responsible for the mission could convene briefly, exchanging essential information.

In the shadows they lingered, while their foes roamed in plain sight. As long as they didn't startle the targets, they could afford to wait. Of course, they had to conclude before Guillaume Bénet's deed with the courtesan reached its conclusion. After all, tailing an individual posed inherent risks, especially when dealing with the padre and his array of bizarre and unfamiliar abilities.

…

In a narrow alley near Rue de la Muraille.

The afternoon sun cast its radiant touch upon the mostly dismantled barricade, while even the breeze seemed to take a momentary pause.

Franca, now garbed in an Assassin's attire, and Jenna, disguised as a female mercenary, rendezvoused with Anthony Reid, still clad in his military green attire, and Lumian, sporting a cap, a black vest, and a white shirt.

Lumian delivered a succinct briefing, omitting details about the Substitution Spell due to time constraints, referring to it merely as a form of witchcraft capable of generating lifelike substitutes.

Soon, an aqueous luminescence radiated from the mirror, accompanied by an aged voice.

"They are both real."

Both real… Franca turned to Lumian in surprise.

The witchcraft responsible for creating the substitute proves potent—resembling the original down to appearance and fate. Conventional divination methods stand powerless against such deception!

Both real… Lumian had anticipated this response and had already devised an alternative course of action.

Sensing his silence, Franca drew a deep breath, hesitatingly suggesting, "D-Do you need me to consult another source?"

She aimed to seek confirmation from the entity renowned for unerring divination.

Yet, this approach risked unveiling a question that could render her socially deceased before Jenna, Lumian, and Anthony Reid.

She envisioned the other party asking, "Do you often entertain the idea of doing the deed with Jenna?"

How would she navigate her future interactions with Jenna?

Lumian shook his head, asserting, "No need. I have a plan."

Turning his attention to Jenna, he directed, "Conceal yourself in the shadows diagonally across from Room 602 in Dill. Keep a vigilant watch on that Guillaume Bénet's activities.

"If he concludes his affairs and prepares to depart, but we haven't arrived yet, refrain from impulsive pursuit. Instead, discreetly monitor his movements from a distance and deduce his chosen path."

"Understood." Jenna nodded, mentally rehearsing her upcoming task.

Lumian shifted his focus to Franca and Anthony Reid.

“Let’s proceed to 50 Rue Vincent together. I’ll directly confront Guillaume Bénet. Franca, maintain invisibility and follow me closely. We mustn’t launch an attack until we’re certain of his authenticity.

“Anthony, secure the perimeter outside. If the Guillaume Bénet on Rue Vincent proves to be counterfeit and we hasten to Dill, covertly monitor the madame there, tracking her movements. In case Guillaume Bénet manages an escape, she could serve as a pivotal lead for subsequent pursuit.

“If the 50 Rue Vincent counterpart is genuine and a skirmish erupts, approach discreetly and provide reinforcement.”

Franca harbored no objections to this arrangement. Aware of Lumian’s teleportation abilities, she grasped that once he confirmed the Rue Vincent Guillaume as fake, he could facilitate swift transition for the primary combatants to the opposite location, preventing the two Guillaumes from “exchanging information.”

Assessing the calculated risks, Anthony endorsed the plan, confirming his willingness to execute his designated role.

…

50 Rue Vincent, near the beige three-story building.

Observing Franca’s seamless invisibility, Lumian raised his right hand and swept it across his face.

In an instant, he transformed into a man in his thirties, attired in a black uniform with an inspector’s epaulet.

Niese Face!

Satisfied with his condition, Lumian proceeded to the designated building and pressed the doorbell.

The door swung open, revealing a man garbed as a butler. His gaze landed on Lumian as he inquired with a touch of confusion, “Officer, how may I assist you?”

“I’m here regarding a missing vagrant case linked to this street. I’d appreciate a conversation with your master,” Lumian nonchalantly fabricated.

A subtle shift occurred in the butler’s expression.

“Please wait a moment, Officer. I shall inquire with our master.”

After a brief pause, the butler returned to the doorway, addressing Lumian, “Officer, our master invites you to the small parlor on the ground floor.”

Lumian offered a slight nod and trailed the butler into the abode at 50 Rue Vincent.

The living area exuded spaciousness, hosting a bluish-gray cat huddled in one corner, its presence accompanied by the ceaseless chirping of caged birds. Positioned in the aisle, a black dog, reminiscent of a hound, remained seated, its gaze unwaveringly fixated on the unfamiliar entrant.

Circumventing an elegant sofa, the butler led Lumian into a parlor towards the rear. There, a man with midnight hair, azure eyes, and a slightly hooked nose reclined in an armchair. He sported a dark-hued shirt and black trousers, his demeanor one of relaxed arrogance as he gently caressed the head of a sizable brown-furred dog.

“Officer, in what way may I be of assistance?” The man inquired, rising with deliberate languor.

It’s him—Guillaume Bénet! Padre Guillaume Bénet! Lumian’s pupils contracted, closing the distance to a mere five meters.

Then, he parted his lips and voiced, “Ha!”

Action was the sole path to distinguishing the genuine from the imposter!

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Chapter 326 - 326 Substitute

326 Substitute

“Ha!”

It instantly struck Guillaume Bénet, dressed in a dark shirt and black pants, causing him to collapse in confusion and shock.

Spell of Harrumph!

He’s fake! Lumian’s eyes narrowed as he assessed the situation. He wasn’t too surprised by the outcome.

It was evident that this wasn’t the real Guillaume Bénet—a Sequence 5 Fate Appropriator. The way the man reacted to the attack, coupled with his lack of familiarity with Beyonder powers and mysticism, made Lumian believe that the substitute was an ordinary person thrust into an unfamiliar world.

Disregarding the bewildered butler, Lumian swiftly turned on his heels and sprinted out of the compact living room.

As he ran, he whispered, “To Dill!”

Franca, draped in her hooded, leather-armored black robe, materialized in front of Lumian.

Lumian grabbed her shoulder, allowing the black mark on his right shoulder to flicker with a dark light.

Amidst the swirling maelstrom of vibrant hues, the duo found themselves on the balcony of Dill’s sixth floor.

Having sent Jenna to inform Albus previously, Lumian had already memorized the coordinates.

Upon seeing her companion arrive, Jenna, dressed as a female mercenary, emerged from the shadows. She pointed at Room 602 and lowered her voice.

“It’s not over yet.

“Dammit, he’s dragging this out!”

“The second round, perhaps?” Lumian chuckled.

According to Albus, the occupant of Room 602 had already blown his load once before having afternoon tea. Now, it had begun again.

“The soundproofing here is impressive,” Franca remarked, her head tilting as she listened for any signs of activity from within Room 602.

Jenna observed as Lumian wiped his face, disguising himself as a typical Dill brothel attendant. She clicked her tongue and voiced her thoughts.

“That woman in there screams occasionally. Dammit, is that perverted padre into some abusive stuff?”

Jenna, an underground singer frequenting bars and dance halls, had cultivated an open and passionate image. Her close rapport with Franca, who managed the dancers, exposed her to a world beyond the ordinary. She had zero experience, but her insights were substantial.

Lumian, his Niese Face transforming him, glanced at Franca, silently requesting her to sprinkle fluorescent powder in the corridor outside Room 602.

Lumian knew that the invisibility didn’t erase traces or scents. Should Guillaume Bénet escape into the corridor during combat, the fluorescent powder would create a luminous trail, guiding Lumian’s pursuit.

However, Lumian reconsidered and decided that the use of fluorescent powder might be too conspicuous. Guillaume Bénet could easily detect the abnormality and escape using his bizarre abilities before Lumian could launch a surprise attack.

After a moment’s reflection, Lumian leaned in to whisper to Franca, “Deploy Invisibility to conceal yourself in the corridor. Use invisible spider silk to create a web that covers the target’s door from the ground to the ceiling.”

This approach would neutralize the effectiveness of Invisibility, while also entangling Guillaume Bénet if he attempted to employ Slow Flight.

“No problem.” Franca adjusted her black hood and entered the corridor.

In a blink, her form dissolved, as if a snowman had melted in the sun.

Seven to eight seconds later, a gentle breeze brushed against Lumian’s legs.

He was taken aback for a moment before comprehending.

Franca is using the invisible spider silk to signal readiness.

Since this dude advanced to a Demoness of Pleasure, everything she does carries a sense of teasing… Yeah, she just advanced and might not have full control over the potion’s power. She could be unwittingly affected…

Muttering inwardly, Lumian shifted his attention to Jenna and instructed, “Conceal yourself in the shadows here. If Guillaume Bénet flees this way, you can shoot or execute an assassination. If that fails, withdraw immediately. If he heads in another direction, don’t pursue.”

“Got it.” Jenna, well-versed in these situations, didn’t push for more involvement.

She understood that her capabilities could be effectively deployed only under specific circumstances.

With his team arranged, Lumian pivoted and directed his gaze at the wooden door of Room 602.

He inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly to steady his nerves.

With that, he fetched an armchair from the balcony and positioned it in the corridor.

The invisible spider silk avoided him as he moved some distance away from Room 602 and set down the chair.

In the following moment, he lightly tapped the chair’s back. Crimson flames flowed from his palm, slithering over the chair like serpents.

As the armchair caught fire, Lumian jogged toward Room 602 without attempting to conceal his movements. He rapped his knuckles against the wooden door.

“What is it?”

A voice tinged with contained anger reverberated from within Room 602, indicating a pivotal juncture.

“Fire! There’s a fire!” Lumian shouted in feigned panic.

Simultaneously, Hunter Lumian detected a distinctive motion—someone getting off the bed.

Two to three seconds later, the door swung open, revealing a naked man wearing an iron-colored half-mask and a white shirt, his lower half exposed.

A brunette, clad in a fishnet nightgown, was still draped over him.

Holy heck, can’t you even let go of her? Franca’s amused commentary echoed in Lumian’s mind from her invisible position diagonally across.

However, Lumian’s focus was unshaken. When the suspected Guillaume Bénet appeared, his gaze flickering towards the smoky, flaming chair, Lumian acted swiftly.

“Ha!”

Another yellowish beam shot forth, piercing through both the man in the iron-colored half-mask and the woman in the fishnet nightgown, enveloping them.

A glimpse of shock and panic flashed across the eyes of the supposed Guillaume Bénet, revealing his grasp of Beyonder powers.

Then, his eyes dulled, and he collapsed, a fraction after the woman.

As the sound of something heavy thudding to the floor echoed, Lumian seemed to enter a surreal trance.

Impossible. A Fate Appropriator like Guillaume Bénet couldn't be knocked out by a Contractee's Spell of Harrumph…

Is he a decoy?

The one at 50 Rue Vincent was an imposter too!

Where is the real Guillaume Bénet?

Shaking off his momentary daze, Lumian knelt, peeling off the iron-colored mask from the unconscious man.

The face beneath was unnervingly familiar—it was the hooked-nose countenance of Guillaume Bénet.

Darkening with concern, Lumian pushed the half-dressed woman away from his target and tore open the white shirt.

In the next heartbeat, his eyes fell upon three black marks resembling signatures on the unconscious man's upper body—one on the left chest, one on the right chest, and another on the abdomen.

This wasn't Guillaume Bénet!

Guillaume Bénet held more than three contracts—probably a dozen or more!

All fake? All substitutes? Lumian clenched his fists, his eyes igniting with an invisible blaze.

He rose, dragging the man, an identical look-alike of Guillaume Bénet, back into Room 602. Then, he found a blanket, swathed the unconscious woman, and deposited her in the corridor.

In the interim, Franca discerned the falsity of the prey once again, vanishing her invisibility. She summoned frost and doused the flames consuming the armchair.

As she transferred the woman from the corridor to a vacant room, Lumian extended his right hand, fingers closing around the throat of the Inevitability bestowed.

With a decisive snap, he broke the man's neck, rendering him unconscious and lifeless.

Following that, he shut the wooden door, drew the ritual silver dagger, and sanctified it. A wall of spirituality enshrouded Room 602.

Subsequently, Lumian initiated the Summoning Dance, opting to engage in a preliminary, purpose-driven spirit channeling through this method.

He had chosen not to enlist Franca's aid for a reason: he was uncertain about the peculiar creatures the deceased had contracted. It was possible they would induce corresponding corruption. Only Lumian, having long been an Inevitability bestowed, remained unaffected by the spirit channeling process.

The sedatives and the last remnants of truth serum from the Bliss Society were reserved for use on the real padre.

…

Diagonally opposite 50 Rue Vincent.

Perched on the second floor of the building and ensconced in cover, Anthony Reid, steadfastly observing the target, espied a graceful lady in a pale-green gown hurrying out, accompanied by her valet, maid, and butler. The group entered a carriage, deftly relocated from the rear to the front entrance, before embarking toward the far end of Rue Vincent.

Without precipitously giving chase, Anthony meticulously memorized specific details concerning the carriage and the horses.

…

Amidst the fervent and contorted dance, the departed spirit detached from its corporeal vessel, hovering midair. It cast a glare laden with animosity and perplexity upon Lumian.

Drawing his own blood, Lumian enacted a command, compelling the spirit to bind to him.

Although desire and voracity ignited within him, Lumian remained resolute, detecting an additional presence.

Summoning the Abyss Demon Flower…

Invisibility…

Transfiguration… Dammit!

An involuntary curse escaped Lumian's lips.

He began to grasp the unfolding situation!

The individual at 50 Rue Vincent was possibly a product of the Substitution Spell. The one at the Dill brothel, on the other hand, had been fashioned as a substitute by Guillaume Bénet, utilizing Transfiguration, exploiting its negative effects.

He was vigilant against anyone exploiting his negative effects to track him down!

Transfiguration was a contractual ability capable of altering a person's appearance, physique, and disposition. It also possessed a measure of resistance against divination. The price exacted was one's own visage, with the detrimental side effect manifesting as a desire for the exploitation of others.

Lumian steadied himself, summoning to mind the genuine Guillaume Bénet—his visage, his deeds. This resonance united with the memories that had left the most indelible mark on the spirit of the deceased, enabling Lumian to hunt for clues.

In due course, a cluster of seven or eight memories quivered slightly. Lumian selected one, striving to magnify it for deeper understanding.

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Chapter 327 - 327 The Real Guillaume Bénet

327 The Real Guillaume Bénet

The memories of the false Guillaume Bénet surged, and Lumian found himself immersed in the familiar confines of 50 Rue Vincent's cozy parlor.

Draped in an air of regal poise, the counterfeit Guillaume Bénet stood before the armchair, addressing the recipient of these memories with calculated words, "Take this money and venture to Rue de la Muraille. There, seek out the renowned courtesan of utmost repute. But you must assume my looks, veiled by a mask."

With humility and deference, the memory's owner bowed. "Understood, Archbishop."

And thus, this memory concluded. Lumian held a steadfast conviction that the Inevitability bestowed before him was a meticulously crafted proxy, a construct devised by none other than Guillaume Bénet himself.

It appeared that he had likely garnered a cohort of adherents to Inevitability. From among them, he had singled out a candidate from southern Intis, one who swiftly reaped three successive boons. This candidate was meticulously endowed with the same abilities as him: the summoning of the Abyss Demon Flower and the shroud of Invisibility. This granted him an impeccable guise, perfectly mirroring the true him thanks to the contracts' negative effects.

Of course, Transfiguration remained an integral, indispensable ability.

From this vantage, it became evident that Guillaume Bénet hadn't neglected the adverse ramifications of the specialized covenant. He might have contemplated this from inception or perhaps gained insight subsequent to a dire prophecy, reviewing his recent undertakings. Regardless, this counterfeit Guillaume Bénet—proficient in Transfiguration—appeared to be a deliberate ruse.

Lumian suspected the presence of other Inevitability devotees who clandestinely monitored the Dill brothel. They clandestinely shadowed the sham Guillaume Bénet, primed to relay swift notification to the authentic padre should danger befall his double.

In such a scenario, Guillaume Bénet enjoyed a distinct advantage—whether he elected to abscond, leaving the product of this Substitution Spell to grapple with looming peril, or opted to ensnare his antagonists using the doppelganger as bait.

Synthesized with the fragments of the fake Guillaume Bénet's recollections, Lumian surmised that the genuine Guillaume Bénet primarily resided at 50 Rue Vincent. Yet, he permitted the substitute to operate overtly, effectively obfuscating his true whereabouts.

Upon this realization, Lumian harbored a pang of vexation.

Had Albus not unearthed the sham Guillaume Bénet within the confines of the Dill brothel, Lumian wouldn't have been lured away from the decoy; he would have been affixed on the Guillaume at 50 Rue Vincent. This would have spared him the frenzied teleportation prompted after the incapacitation of the Substitution Spell's byproduct. Lumian would have gravitated towards scouring the building, conceivably unearthing the genuine Guillaume Bénet.

Granted, absent the synchronous "appearance" of Guillaume Bénet, Lumian wouldn't have entertained notions of a Substitution Spell. He'd have likely fallen prey to deception, swerving far from the path leading to the authentic padre.

With this epiphany at the forefront, Lumian cast aside his intention to scout for lurking Inevitability adherents. Recognizing that the bona fide Guillaume Bénet had been alerted, Lumian terminated his Summoning Dance and dissolved the wall of spirituality. Turning to Franca and Jenna, shrouded in separate shadows, he intoned, "Let's head to 50 Rue Vincent now."

Presently, Lumian clung to the hope that vestiges of clues lingered or that Anthony Reid, entrusted with overseeing the locale, had gleaned pertinent insights…

Franca and Jenna emerged from the shadows one after another, wasting no time to inquire about the current situation. Lumian grabbed their shoulders and activated spirit world traversal once more.

In the blink of an eye, their forms solidified within the modest confines of 50 Rue Vincent's parlor.

Absent were the butler, valets, and maids, leaving an unattended figure—unconscious, the result of the Substitution Spell—laid out on the carpet.

A meticulous scan of the surroundings concluded with Lumian's approach. He knelt beside the proxy, employing a variety of techniques to rouse him from his stupor.

As the counterfeit Guillaume Bénet's eyes fluttered open, they met an unfamiliar visage.

Startled, he jolted upright, fear tinting his tone. "Who are you? Why did you barge into my house? Get out! I'll call the police! I'll call the police!"

He recollected the recent attack—a curse-like assault!

Lumian drew his revolver and pressed it against the fake Guillaume Bénet's forehead.

The substitute fell silent.

"Where is the true master of this residence?" Lumian's voice resounded, deep and steady.

As if pierced by a sudden realization, the imposter Guillaume Bénet spat out, "I am the true master!

"I'm the master here!"

Lumian's lips curled into a smile.

"In that case, I offer my sympathies. Your wife, it seems, ran off with the butler with your valuables. The valets and maids, meanwhile, seem to have embraced an opportunistic approach—essentially relieving you of anything tangible except this house.

"In a while, the police will arrest you, citing your involvement in the slaying of a vagrant and perpetrating cultic rituals and extensive deceit."

A mosaic of fact and conjecture, Lumian's words emerged with an intent to intimidate the substitute, dismantling any fantastical illusions.

Considering the retreat of the madame, butler, valets, maids, coachman, and gardener from 50 Rue Vincent, Lumian inferred their conversion into believers of Inevitability, orchestrated by the genuine padre. This intricate maneuver camouflaged a multitude of cultic practices and eccentric observances, all harmonized through the Substitution Spell.

The false Guillaume Bénet at Dill, having reached Sequence 7 Contractee status, was indicative of multiple instances of boon-request rituals in Trier. Innocents would undoubtedly become sacrifices, and the best candidates were undoubtedly tramps.

At Lumian's declaration, the imitation Guillaume Bénet gazed about, bewildered and panic-stricken, his voice piercingly beseeching, "Paulina! Paulina!"

Paulina… It's indeed the Condiment Beauty. Unfortunately, she's now a heretic… Lumian watched as the fake Guillaume Bénet fell silent, his eyes filled with despair.

"Any final words?" Lumian inquired once more.

The fake Guillaume Bénet shuddered and said, "I'm real. I'm really the master of this place!

“However, that woman—that woman is a succubus. She surreptitiously lured someone and ensconced him within the cellar!

“Sh-she’s having an affair with a devil!”

Affair with a devil… In the basement… Was she secretly meeting the real padre in private? Yes, the negative effects of Guillaume Bénet’s desire for coitus will always exist. They won’t disappear just because he has two substitutes… Lumian scrutinized the mock Guillaume Bénet, who tenaciously clung to his fa?ade as the genuine master of 50 Rue Vincent. Left hand poised, he controlled his might, and with precision, delivered a calculated blow behind the imposter’s ear.

The fake Guillaume Bénet fainted again.

Lumian’s strategy entailed swift exploration of the residence, as allowing the imposter to run amok could inadvertently trigger calamity.

He rose to his feet, massaging his throbbing temples, and turned to Franca and Jenna for an update. “Any word from Anthony Reid?”

“No.” Franca shook her head gently. “It seems he followed your directive to trail Madame Paulina.”

Lumian tersely acknowledged.

“Then let’s search this place and await his feedback.”

Franca adjusted her black hood and emphasized, “One team of three. Don’t split up.”

This was the “territory” of the heretics. Even if they had already escaped, residual vestiges might still remain. Should they split their efforts and encounter mishaps, timely rescue would be jeopardized.

When the authorities carried out such operations, they had to be at least in groups of three or within sight of each other if they wanted to split up.

Lumian issued a pointed gesture toward the staircase adjacent to the parlor, “Let’s proceed to the basement.”

The trio descended, and as they did, Franca leaned to Jenna, her tone hushed,

“Ciel’s exchange with the counterfeit was textbook instigation. When you return, dissect the intent behind each phrase.”

“Okay.” Jenna absorbed the counsel like a parched sponge.

In due course, they reached the basement door. Lumian turned toward his companions,

“Preparations before we venture inside.”

To thwart lingering echoes of Inevitability’s powers or unconventional creatures, precaution was paramount.

Promptly, Lumian, now adorned with altered visage and partially lengthened hair, pushed the door open, revealing the basement’s dim recesses.

Within, an unremarkable array of miscellaneous items cluttered the space. No conspicuous anomalies were apparent.

Just as Franca readied for Magic Mirror Divination, Lumian, with his Hunter’s acumen, discerned subtle traces.

With metallic clinks, he unveiled a concealed door.

Beyond lay a stairwell descending further into the subterranean depths.

The trio descended cautiously, arriving after moments at a vast yet rudimentary chamber, bathed in gas lamp radiance.

It was unknown if Guillaume Bénet had created it himself or if he had sealed off a portion of Underground Trier and modified it into a private “territory.”

In the center of the stone-floored hall stood an altar, surrounded by ghastly white human bones, complete sheepskin, cowhide, and giant canine skin.

Upon seeing this, Lumian was taken aback as he recalled one of the five special ritualistic magics that Alms Monk had:

Animal Creation Spell!

Simultaneously, remembrances of the felines, avians, and canines inhabiting the floor above, and the brown-furred dog nestled beside the mock Guillaume Bénet, surged forth.

Dog… Dog… Animal Creation Spell… With an epiphanic rush, Lumian pieced together the genuine Guillaume Bénet’s concealment.

He had invoked the Animal Creation Spell to transmute himself into the hulking, brown-furred canine. In this form, he paraded brazenly before his counterfeit and the surrounding onlookers.

With a recitation of the preordained incantation, the true Guillaume Bénet could rapidly molt his canine facade, resuming his human guise.

…

In the confines of the parlor, the counterfeit Guillaume Bénet remained enshrouded in an unconscious reverie, utterly oblivious to the stark duality

between reality and illusion.

Cautiously, he inched the guest room door ajar, greeted by a jarring tableau. Before him sprawled his beautiful wife, Paulina, ensconced upon the sumptuous bed, unclothed, whilst a hulking brown-furred canine loomed beside her. At the bedside, a plate bearing a medium-cooked steak was positioned…

…

Amidst clenched teeth, Lumian communicated the enigma of the Animal Creation Spell and his speculative hypothesis to Franca and Jenna, his words resounding, “I hope we find that damned dog. No, he should have shed his dog skin by now.”

Animal Creation Spell… Humans turning into dogs… Jenna was alarmed.

The world of mysticism is so bizarre and terrifying!

The three of them worked together and swiftly searched for traces.

Before long, Jenna picked up something from a crevice in the stone slab and exclaimed in surprise, “I’ve found something!”

Franca ran over and realized it was brown dog fur.

Both approached Lumian, who continued his investigative fervor, presenting their find.

Lumian’s elation was palpable. He postulated Guillaume Bénet’s evasion via an underground covert route, disentangling him from Paulina and the rest.

Then, they discovered a few strands of brown dog fur. Following the fur, they found another hidden door.

After opening the hidden door in the rock wall, Franca performed a simple Magic Mirror Divination and received a revelation that nothing was amiss. Then, she followed Lumian and Jenna in.

At that moment, Jenna, who was in the middle of the group, lost sight of Lumian. Franca was still following behind her.

Without waiting for Jenna to speak, Franca surveyed the room and frowned.

“We’ve circled back to the sacrificial hall.”

…

Emerging through the secret door, Lumian entered an expanse echoing a quarry’s cavern.

With gas lamps conspicuously absent, Lumian summoned forth a crimson blaze to pierce the shadows.

Almost simultaneously, he sensed that Jenna and Franca hadn’t followed him.

We got separated just like that? Puzzlement swirled within Lumian’s mind, overridden by a low voice that echoed from the abandoned mine’s depths: “Lumian Lee!”

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Chapter 328 - 328 Bottle of Fiction

328 Bottle of Fiction

“Lumian Lee!”

Lumian found himself frozen in place, his gaze distant as he reacted to the ominous growl.

In a shadowy corner of the abandoned mine, a figure outlined itself.

Clad in a complete coat of brown dog skin, the figure’s torso and abdomen burst open, revealing a human form adorned in a white robe, embellished with intricate silver and black threads.

Without a sound, the canine skin dropped to the ground, unveiling a man of slight stature, barely reaching 1.7 meters.

His thin black hair framed a face with sharply intense blue eyes, and a slightly upturned nose added to his air of authority. This was none other than Guillaume Bénet, the padre of Cordu Village!

At that very moment, a smile graced Guillaume Bénet’s lips. He held a white human bone in his grasp, his eyes aflame with a fanatical zeal that suggested he was on the cusp of receiving a newfound boon from the forces of Inevitability, a boon that could reshape his destiny.

Guillaume Bénet’s initial instinct was to flee from 50 Rue Vincent the moment he saw his decoy incapacitated by the strange spell, and his adversary vanishing through the aid of spirit world traversal.

In doing so, the decoy could fulfill its full potential of averting disaster. He would escape the looming catastrophe, embarking on a fresh start in a new location, unburdened by the present circumstances.

Yet, within an instant, his abilities as a Fate Appropriator alerted him to the anomaly in the assailant’s destiny and the lingering traces of a formidable entity aligned with the Inevitability pathway.

From this revelation, he deduced that the individual responsible was Lumian Lee, the very person harboring the angel he had once tirelessly invoked!

Rapid thoughts raced through Guillaume Bénet’s mind. As a devoted adherent to the might of Inevitability, he was instantly consumed by zealous fervor.

He sought to capture or eliminate Lumian Lee!

He aspired to break the seal, allowing Inevitability's angel to truly descend upon the land!

He yearned to obtain a godhood boon, breaking free from the constraints of mortality. He longed to stand as Inevitability's chosen representative, guiding the troves of foolish humanity.

Having swiftly assessed the situation on both fronts, Guillaume Bénet ordered Paulina and the others to flee, luring any potential allies of Lumian Lee away from the scene. Meanwhile, he left behind the "substitute," creating a trail of clues for Lumian Lee to follow—leading him into the basement to unveil a hidden door.

With his preparations in place, Guillaume Bénet entered the sacrificial chamber, deliberately preserving the sheepskin, cowhide, and dog skin. This would enable Lumian Lee, already versed in the Animal Creation Spell, to swiftly uncover the truth.

Simultaneously, he shook off a tuft of dog fur, inadvertently revealing his escape route. He chanted the incantation he had prearranged, dispelling the Animal Creation Spell. Drawing upon his concealed power, Guillaume Bénet unlocked the door leading to Underground Trier—a contractual power known as the Bottle of Fiction.

This ability, a source of personal avarice, enabled Guillaume Bénet to convert designated, modest-sized spaces—those harboring symbolic elements like doors and windows—into realms encapsulated within the Bottle of Fiction. He could impose simple entry conditions, permitting only those who met the prerequisites to enter, while others would be promptly returned to their original positions.

Guillaume Bénet's stipulation for entry was "one bearing the power of Inevitability."

This criterion was one he shared with Lumian Lee. Regardless of whether Lumian had embraced Inevitability's boon, as a carrier of the Inevitability angel, enmeshed in the threads of fate, he undeniably possessed Inevitability's power. This design ensured that Lumian's allies couldn't breach the Bottle of Fiction's barrier without a boon of Inevitability. It left only Lumian Lee and himself secluded within. And if they had indeed embraced Inevitability, they would both remain influenced by the great existence—transforming them into equivalent companions during pivotal moments.

Guillaume Bénet sidestepped the utilization of individuals hailing from Cordu as entry criteria into the Bottle of Fiction, as it posed a vexing challenge to confirm such origins. Such a determination demanded consultation with the spirit world, unlike the more direct assessment of one possessing a distinct power.

Furthermore, should Paulina and the others manage to elude their pursuers and return to this very spot, they could provide essential aid through the opening of the

bottle.

Having meticulously orchestrated his plan, Guillaume Bénet concealed himself, poised for Lumian Lee's entry into the Bottle of Fiction.

As anticipated, upon seeing Lumian Lee, now under an altered guise yet devoid of any traces of the Inevitability angel's influence, Guillaume Bénet took swift action, invoking the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell.

Understanding that Lumian Lee wasn't the individual's original name but had been assumed for nearly six years, recognized by all those around him, Guillaume Bénet was certain this identity held a mystic connection that could serve as the true name.

Endowed with the knowledge of Cordu as its padre, he possessed a certain insight into Lumian Lee's circumstances. With conviction in the efficacy of the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, he anticipated it would gravely disorient Lumian Lee.

Observing Lumian Lee's form, frozen at the threshold of the Bottle of Fiction, head bowed and body swaying with instability, Guillaume Bénet's grin expanded.

Acting without hesitation or speech, he hurled the white human bone he clutched, intending to employ a curse spell capable of rendering the target comatose indefinitely.

With this achieved and Lumian Lee under his sway, his intention was to retrieve the pre-prepared ritual sheepskin, enshroud the captive, and intone the incantation, transforming him into a voiceless, nearly powerless sheep.

At that juncture, Guillaume Bénet could lead the sheep elsewhere, endeavoring to shatter the seal and unleash the imprisoned angel.

Once successful, he would ascend to sainthood, becoming a potent human figure bestowed with godhood powers!

Smack!

As the bone landed, Guillaume Bénet surged forward, rapidly enunciating a Hermes incantation.

"Blind, d…"

Midway through the chant, the padre—having made all of Cordu village a sacrificial offering—suddenly experienced a tightening within his chest, an uncommon premonition heralded by fate.

For him, such premonitions occurred rarely. Including this instance, it was the second occurrence. The prior occasion had led him to reassess his actions upon arriving in Trier, spurring him to execute the Substitution Spell and Transfiguration, generating a substitute.

With absolute faith in Inevitability, Guillaume Bénet ceased his chant and lunged to the side.

In the next second, he heard Lumian's voice.

"Hmph!"

A nearly imperceivable white beam shot forth from Lumian's nostrils, impacting the precise spot where Guillaume Bénet had stood. The beam streaked through the air, vanishing upon contact with the uneven gray-black terrain.

Lumian's gaze lifted, his eyes extraordinarily clear, seemingly untouched by the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell.

Concealed beneath his elongated hair, his ears were snugly filled with soft paper balls!

In anticipation of residual effects upon entering the basement, he had taken precautionary measures, blocking his ears and altering his appearance to fend off the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell's influence.

How could I be affected if I can't even hear you call my name?

Admittedly, the paper balls couldn't wholly stifle sound. A faint shout did reach Lumian, though he failed to discern it as his name. The impact was but a mild vertigo, quickly dissipating.

Capitalizing on this opportunity, he deduced the affliction he had confronted to be the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell. With feigned gravity, he baited his lurking adversary into revealing himself, launching a surprise counter with the Spell of Harrumph.

Yet, Lumian hadn't envisaged Guillaume Bénet as his assailant.

Unwilling to flee just yet, he clung to his resolve to confront the foe and liberate the imprisoned angel!

Such a determination heightened Lumian's intensity, a fusion of anxiety and exultation, an undercurrent of madness underscoring his elation.

Instantaneously, Guillaume Bénet vanished upon landing beside him. Ebony tendrils, contorted like serpentine forms, descended from the mine's apex, shrouding the Bottle of Fiction in an enveloping embrace, blossoming into colossal flowers as crimson as blood.

Circling the entryway, Lumian retrieved the iron-gray military alcohol flask, uncapped it, and withdrew the Decency brooch.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! Emerald-green arrows exuding a pale pallor streaked forth from the rear of the black vine, piercing the space Lumian had just vacated.

Where these arrows connected, the rocks and earth seemed to undergo the assault of concentrated acid, manifesting glaring and exaggerated signs of corrosion.

After donning the Decency brooch, Lumian's form agilely evaded the Ghastly Green Arrows, targeting his cranium. Simultaneously, he genuflected and inclined forward, palms pressed to the gravel and dirt.

Abruptly, vermillion flames surged forth, forging a crescent-like barrier.

This fiery barricade extended in all directions, kindling the obsidian vines in its path and inciting the vivid flowers, their fierce maws agape.

An inconspicuous, saccharine aroma permeated the air, inducing a drowsy haze, an inclination toward slumber.

Guillaume Bénet, unveiling himself after launching the Ghastly Green Arrows, nimbly shifted his position. Inhaling the anesthetic gas engendered by the blazing Abyss Demon Flowers, he beheld the crimson wall poised to transmute the entire abandoned mine into an inferno.

Why would Lumian Lee ignite the Abyss Demon Flowers, knowing they induce sleep? A momentary bewilderment flashed across Guillaume Bénet.

In a flash, his insight converged with Lumian's stratagem.

Lumian aimed to cultivate an environment saturated with anesthetic gas, an environment impartial to ally or adversary alike!

In essence, this would induce slumber in Lumian Lee as well as Guillaume Bénet. Lumian's companions stood sentry outside the Bottle of Fiction. It was conceivable they would soon decipher a means to shatter the contract spell's hold!

Comprehending this, Guillaume Bénet emitted a disdainful snort, his visage adorned with a metallic sheen.

Steel Body!

This was also a contract ability he had never exhibited in front of Lumian Lee.

Temporarily morphing him into a metallic entity, it rendered Guillaume Bénet impervious to the anesthetic gas's effects!

Naturally, metamorphosing into a metallic entity would curtail his capacity to wield most of his abilities.

…

Outside the Bottle of Fiction.

Upon grasping that she and Jenna had returned to the sacrificial chamber while Lumian had mysteriously disappeared, Franca swiftly procured a mirror.

Stains of blood and black splotches marred the mirror's surface.

Puzzled, Jenna inquired, "Why are you employing Mirror Substitution?"

Wouldn't it be more sensible to make another attempt at traversing the hidden door?

With an air of solemnity, Franca explained, "This mirror carries the Mirror Substitution spell I prepared for Ciel prior to our mission. It allows me to cast a reversed curse on Ciel.

"Presently, I'll employ a milder curse to assess if I can establish a connection with him."

Should she succeed in placing a curse upon Lumian, it would imply the connection remained intact. If the bond hadn't been severed, an alternative resolution had to be pursued!

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Chapter 329 - 329 Metallic Creature

329 Metallic Creature

Simultaneously with Franca's explanation, inky flames emanated from her right hand, melding with the mirror that belonged to Lumian's substitute.

Jenna observed with a mixture of apprehension, her breath held involuntarily.

…

Within the Bottle of Fiction.

Just as the wall of flames surged forth, kindling the Abyss Demon Flowers, a pang of agony gnawed at Lumian's heart, birthing a faint shroud of black flames upon his chest.

In response, his Spirit Body descended gradually, drawn into an abyssal darkness, a void obliterating light.

Curse? Lumian, ensconced within the cradle of crimson flames, was caught off guard.

The reasons behind this unexpected curse eluded him.

On the one hand, he had preemptively plugged his ears, blunting the impact of the Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell. On the other, Guillaume Bénet lay concealed among the dormant Abyss Demon Flowers, offering no overt indications of invoking contract abilities. Furthermore, he remained unscathed, leaving behind neither flesh nor blood. Every strand of his discarded hair had been consumed by the encroaching flames.

As the black flames emerged, the curse lingered at a subdued level, manifesting as a faint affliction that refrained from impeding his movements. Instantaneously, Lumian formulated a hypothesis.

This curse came from Franca!

Employing Mirror Substitution, she sought to reach out to him!

With renewed determination, Lumian thrust his hands in the direction of the padre's covert location.

Resounding with crackling, another barrier of crimson flames materialized, fire enveloping the descending Abyss Demon Flowers.

Leveraging this veil to obscure Guillaume Bénet's line of sight, Lumian pivoted and sprinted toward the entryway of the Bottle of Fiction.

His actions and his overt choice resonated with unmistakable clarity, conveying to Guillaume Bénet: Why should I fight you within your chosen battleground? If my comrades are barred from entry, I'll venture outside and unite with them!

Emerging from his concealment behind a cluster of Abyss Demon Flowers, Guillaume Bénet radiated a metallic gleam across his exposed skin.

Blazing tongues of fire surged toward him, yet they could only "strip away" a fraction of fabric, unable to sear his flesh.

Through the fiery veil, the Cordu padre bestowed a smile upon Lumian's indistinct figure.

Given the capability to freely traverse the Bottle of Fiction with requisite conditions fulfilled, he had ingeniously laid a trap at the entryway, awaiting Lumian's unwitting ensnarement!

Having assumed a metallic form, his utility was confined to boons involving his body, fate, and three distinct contract abilities untouched by his transformation. Among the latter was:

Shadow Burial!

A black mark on Guillaume Bénet's torso wavered, summoning pallid-white and abyssal-black arms that extended from the encroaching shadows, ensnaring Lumian, mid-sprint toward the entryway.

Lumian, with a forceful stomp, catapulted into the air, seemingly aiming to vault over the eerie appendages emerging from the shadows, seeking sanctuary at the hushed, inky exit.

Behind him, a crimson fireball materialized, poised to detonate at a moment's notice, transmuting into a vessel of obliteration.

Simultaneously, fierce fireballs ignited to his left and right, as if poised to counteract the grasp of the arms.

Guillaume Bénet's metallic visage bore a smile more discernible than before, though it remained deprived of vitality—stern and emotionless.

He anticipated Lumian's imminent leap into the Bottle of Fiction's exit.

The strange arms accompanying the Shadow Burial served as a diversionary tactic, forestalling any suspicions from arising!

It's a pity that I can't use Bone Curse in my metallic state. Otherwise, this would be a good opportunity… Guillaume Bénet hesitated to dispel his Steel Body and

deal Lumian another blow.

That way, he wouldn't be able to transform into a metallic creature again anytime soon. The abandoned mine now permeated with anesthetic gas would shortly transform into an inferno. For weak humans lacking godhood, this hostile terrain was untenable. Even Alms Monks could sustain themselves only a brief interval longer.

In the throes of hesitation, Guillaume Bénet ultimately opted to persist with Shadow Burial, permitting the nightmarish arms to continue their relentless encroachment upon Lumian.

With a vigorous leap, Lumian neared the exit of the Bottle of Fiction, almost within grasp.

At that moment, the pitch-black exit—a shadowed orifice devoid of flame—suddenly writhed faintly, akin to a shadowy maw yearning for sustenance.

Undetected, a suffused aura of "shadow" had enshrouded the secret door's surface, a profundity seemingly imbued with life!

This was a trap Guillaume Bénet had meticulously laid. The mechanism lay dormant during Lumian's initial entrance, solely activating when Lumian attempted exit. This safeguard was devised to preempt Lumian from having any danger premonitions when initially entering the Bottle of Fiction, deterring him from braving its confines.

Lumian perceived the sensation of plummeting into an abyss, the final lifeline eluding his grip.

The deceptively thin veil of darkness coiled, an amalgam of endless shadows that converged into an abyssal maw, an aperture on the verge of engulfing him.

Mid-flight, Lumian extended his right palm, yet just before it made contact with the shadowy maw shrouding the hidden door, he abruptly withdrew it, mimicking a gesture of prying open a door.

In tandem, the Decency brooch nestled upon his right chest emitted a subdued golden glow.

Distortion!

Lumian distorted the action of opening the door with the concept of "unsealing this confined space!"

From the outset, his intent to depart the Bottle of Fiction was absent. Instead, he sought to find a way for his companions to infiltrate, thus furnishing reinforcement.

This enclave laden with combustible resources stood as a haven for a Pyromaniac!

Boom!

With a resounding detonation, the crimson fireball positioned to Lumian's left erupted, issuing a horizontal thrust that exacted a substantial toll. His attire lay rent, and his flesh bore charred imprints, inflicted by the fiery onslaught. Gradually nearing the shadowy vortex, the forceful explosion propelled him away from the exit of the Bottle of Fiction and beyond the enshrouded region brimming with appendages swathed in pallid-white and abyssal-black.

Resounding with a thud, Lumian tumbled, ensconcing himself behind a rampart of surging flames. This maneuver forestalled the further encroachment of the shadowy expanse, obliging the strange arms to contend with the blistering blaze.

Outside the Bottle of Fiction.

A frigid zephyr brushed against Franca and Jenna, wafting from the hidden door's interior.

Swiftly, the chill metamorphosed into a searing fervor. Behind the hidden door lay a derelict mine engulfed in a sea of crimson flames, the blazing inferno punctuated by the descent of undistorted fire dragons, their incandescence unbridled.

The remaining black vines, the crimson flowers, and the strange arms all succumbed to the fiery onslaught, pursued relentlessly by the raging conflagration.

Signaling to Jenna, Franca receded into the shadows as she drew closer to the hidden door.

Jenna understood Franca's intentions and rationally retreated into the shadows outside the hidden door, concealing herself.

She knew that it would be difficult for her to participate in the battle with her strength. Thus, she chose to bide her time, awaiting the enemy's emergence through the threshold, poised to exploit a fleeting opportunity to deliver a decisive, lethal strike.

Within the ajar Bottle of Fiction, Lumian, having concluded his somersault, propped himself up with a single hand.

Locking his gaze onto the distant Guillaume Bénet—his form akin to that of a metallic marionette—Lumian's lips curled wordlessly, yielding an eruption of crimson flames that engulfed his flesh and attire.

A familiar pang of torment reverberated across Lumian's psyche, jolting him awake from the lethargic stupor.

It's been some time! Lumian's grin was tinged with distortion as he hurtled toward the metal-encased Guillaume Bénet. His forward momentum stirred the encompassing crimson flames, elongating behind him like a shimmering, unfurled cape.

Wary of Lumian's earlier utilization of the harrumph spell, Guillaume Bénet, resembling a puppet forged from steel, evaded direct confrontation, executing artful shifts in position.

Discerning Lumian's strategy of harnessing the flames to stave off the Abyss Demon Flowers-induced anesthetic gas, Guillaume Bénet discerned this endeavor to be fleeting. At best, Lumian's fiery gambit would delay his descent into unconsciousness. Certain matters couldn't be resolved by self-harm!

Having adopted the form of a metallic entity via Steel Body, Guillaume Bénet remained impervious to the anesthetic gas's effects, even forgoing the need to draw breath. This form also minimized the conflagration's impact on him. Guillaume Bénet was convinced that Steel Body's efficacy would persist until Lumian Lee succumbed to unconsciousness.

Furthermore, his assessment revealed Lumian's substantial spirituality expenditure, coupled with Lumian's evident abstention from spirit world traversal.

This deduction led Guillaume Bénet to surmise that the harrumph spell likely bore limitations on its frequency of use.

Of course, sustained evasion was untenable. Lumian Lee's actions hinted at him using some unconventional means to open the Bottle of Fiction, suggesting his companions had likely infiltrated covertly through invisibility. Guillaume Bénet couldn't allow this duo to demonstrate the potency of their teamwork.

Nimbly maneuvering around the plummeting tendrils of flaming vines, Guillaume Bénet executed a sudden pivot, facing Lumian with unwavering intent.

His metallic countenance mirrored the flaming luminance, refracting a kaleidoscopic iridescence.

Myriads of diminutive "rainbows" coalesced, cleaving Guillaume Bénet as though he gazed upon his mirror image.

Light Incarnation!

One of the three contractual abilities accessible in his Steel Body state.

Its premise lay in leveraging light to forge a fleeting incarnation, capable of channeling an individual's capabilities.

Two metallic Guillaume Bénets surged toward Lumian simultaneously.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Each stride they undertook fostered corporeal expansion, culminating in the metamorphosis into metallic titans, which tore asunder their white robes adorned with silver-black threads.

Elevating his right hand, Lumian summoned into being a host of crimson Fire Ravens that swirled about him.

The Fire Ravens promptly surged toward the two Guillaume Bénets, demonstrating no clemency.

Given the inherent challenge of distinguishing authenticity from imitation within a short span of time, Lumian adopted a stratagem of unleashing an onslaught indiscriminately—comprising both genuine and illusory manifestations!

For truth could not be falsified, nor could falsity be genuine!

In an abrupt detonation, the Guillaume Bénet before him disintegrated.

Rumble!

Accompanied by the explosion, amid which a multitude of Fire Ravens were prematurely engulfed in combustion, a Water Cannon sculpted from dark-green liquid surged forth from the fake Guillaume Bénet's fragmented remnants.

The Water Cannon, of astonishing alacrity and proximity, penetrated Lumian's fiery shroud, impinging upon his form. As a consequence, Lumian's physique began exhibiting telltale signs of liquefaction.

Draynere Gland Poison!

One of three contractual abilities he could use as a metallic entity!

With a brittle crack, Lumian's corporeal structure fractured, metamorphosing into mirrors.

A mere ten meters from Guillaume Bénet, Franca, owing to the activation of Mirror Substitution, involuntarily escaped her state of Invisibility.

Observing her emergence, Guillaume Bénet's blue irises assumed a pallor bordering on translucence. A deft push of his right palm propagated the emergence of an expansive river of mercurial sigils encircling Franca.

Pitting himself directly against Lumian Lee proved to be a disconcerting engagement for Guillaume Bénet. His paramount and most formidable Fate Appropriator ability remained inaccessible, for its utilization would catalyze a consequential backlash from Inevitability.

Since it couldn't be used on Lumian Lee, it could be used on his companion!

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Chapter 330 - 330 Forewarned is Forearmed

330 Forewarned is Forearmed

A Fate Appropriator harbored two primary abilities:

Firstly, the capacity to magnify a corresponding fate tributary, thereby setting in stone an imminent destiny for the target. This process could be expeditious, yet its future influence spanned a mere ten seconds. The resulting efficacy was contingent upon environmental compatibility; a more congruent backdrop augmented the probability of the event materializing in the forthcoming future.

Secondly, the ability to swap an accumulated fate for a fragment of the target's own destiny. Absent a premeditated arrangement, one had to either kill the adversary to access their fate or employ their personal fate as a substitute. Relatively more protracted in execution than magnifying an impending fate tributary, this method prohibited one from assailing the target or inducing harm mid-process.

At this moment, Guillaume Bénet, who wasn't fighting one-on-one, clearly didn't want to engage in a fate exchange. His plan was to utilize the current environment and magnify Lumian Lee's female companion's fate tributary of being affected by the Abyss Demon Flower's anesthetic gas to make it a reality.

Of course, as the woman in the black hood hadn't fallen asleep and wouldn't be paralyzed or knocked unconscious for ten seconds, the sole recourse was to expedite the process while steering it toward the most dire outcome.

In a similar vein, this elucidated one of the rationales behind Guillaume Bénet's abstention from interfering with Lumian Lee's fate tributary.

What he refrained from attempting was the exchange of the adversary's fate or the inversion of key tributaries into the principal course, lest he suffered the backlash invoked by Inevitability. He wouldn't have a problem if he only made Lumian Lee slip and fall, achieving futures that wouldn't have significant impact.

The mercurial river encircling Franca was reflected in Guillaume Bénet's lightened eyes. After some discernment, he grabbed at one of the tributaries formed by the mercury symbol that wrapped around itself.

Concurrently, Franca arched her neck, thereby unveiling her supple neck and moist vermilion lips under the hood's shadows.

Peculiarly, a palpable flutter stirred in Guillaume Bénet's chest, reverberating to his nether regions as he recollected scenes of his liaisons with courtesans along Rue de la Muraille. Yet, these recollections paled in allure compared to the figure opposite him, despite her visage remaining partially veiled.

Despite his momentary lapse, Guillaume Bénet promptly reinstated his focus.

Capitalizing upon this fleeting respite, Franca—enlightened to the general scope of a Fate Appropriator's abilities courtesy of Lumian—sparked latent black flames, engendering frost that enshrouded her form.

Opaque filaments converged, manifesting palpable encasement amid the frigid shroud, akin to a cocoon.

Unperturbed, Guillaume Bénet's lips curled into a smirk, unfazed by the unfolding situation.

If a Fate Appropriator's abilities were so easily rendered ineffectual, they wouldn't be called Fate Appropriators!

Furthermore, as long as the target's fate tributary was magnified or underwent a fate exchange, they wouldn't be able to break free even if they used a substitute.

With measured deliberation, Guillaume Bénet extended his right palm and executed a slight wrist rotation, magnifying a particular fate he had chosen.

Nonetheless, in this precise instant, he perceived the hooded lady's fate river adopting an uncanny semblance of illusory ambiguity, an etherealness so pronounced as to border on feigned fabrication.

A decoy!

Guillaume Bénet's endeavor to augment the fate tributary was abruptly thwarted. The cocoon disintegrated, frost fragmenting and black flames metamorphosing into coruscating beams of light.

Yet, the focus of the protection wasn't Franca herself, but rather, a mirror!

Capitalizing on Guillaume Bénet's momentary bewilderment, a casualty of the Demoness of Pleasure's allure and his self-imposed adverse effects, Franca seized the initiative. Employing Mirror Substitution, she ensconced herself in layers of black flames, frost, and spider silk, confounding the adversary while concealing the real lethal peril.

Thus, she extricated herself from the figurative crosshairs, evading the adversary's targeting.

Simultaneously with the failure of Guillaume Bénet's attempt to amplify the fate tributary, a figure garbed in an Assassin's attire manifested behind him, its visage partially obscured by a classic brass revolver, aimed steadfastly at the enemy's

cranium before pulling the trigger.

Bang!

The iron-black round collided with the dodging Guillaume Bénet's head, emitting a distinct metallic clang.

Guillaume Bénet's head, bedecked in a metallic sheen, yielded to the impact, though its structural integrity endured, deflecting a potentially lethal strike.

Nearly in tandem, Lumian, having used Mirror Substitution to evade the effects of Draynere Gland Poison, and draped in flaming clothes, emerged nearby. Dropping to a genuflecting posture, he pressed his palms to the ground.

In response, twin crimson fire serpents surged into being, consuming the incendiary vines while spreading the flames along their trajectory, ultimately converging to form a colossal pair of fire dragons.

Both entities surged toward Guillaume Bénet. However, their purpose wasn't to ingest their quarry, but to intertwine and coalesce, giving rise to an ostentatious and brilliant conflagration-blooming flower.

As the fiery flower unfurled before him, Guillaume Bénet grappled with comprehending Lumian Lee's intentions.

With his Steel Body, his resistance to flames was steadfast for the time being, but the other party wouldn't go as far as wasting an opportunity and do nothing but perform fire magic, right?

This was Bribe!

Lumian had "gifted" Guillaume Bénet with a blazing flower—an emblem signifying incineration and obliteration. Capitalizing on the Decency brooch, he had completed a Bribe, thereby attenuating the adversary's defenses.

Although Lumian Lee's true motives remained opaque, Guillaume Bénet's intuition kindled with the conviction that this augured unfavorably.

In rapid succession, Guillaume Bénet invoked Light Incarnation anew, fragmenting into three iterations as he advanced toward Lumian. As Franca's assault faltered, she vanished anew.

Witnessing the three iterations of the metalized Guillaume Bénet rapidly engorge, Lumian conjured a new cohort of Fire Ravens and distributed them evenly amongst the trio of adversaries.

Then, turning his form and slowing his pace, he primed himself for a prospective evasion of the ensuing Water Cannon conjured from Draynere Gland Poison.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh! The crimson Fire Ravens landed precisely on the three metalized Guillaume Bénets.

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

They exploded simultaneously!

A torrent of dark-green liquid surged forth from one of Guillaume Bénet's forms—Water Cannon. Lumian, braced for the assault, deftly evaded, his gaze fixed upon the collision of aqueous impact against the rocky wall, a tremor rippling through the Bottle of Fiction.

Yet, as Lumian's evasion completed, he detected a colossal shadow enshrouding his feet. Thereupon, a medley of pallid-white and obsidian-black arms extended forth from this obscurity.

In contrast, Lumian's other choice of direction was shrouded in a dark shadow.

At Sequence 5, Light Incarnation permitted Guillaume Bénet the creation of up to three incarnations, each incarnation fake. One harbored Draynere Gland Poison, while the other pair wielded Shadow Burial, intent on ensnaring Lumian within their shade-infused grasp.

Curved, grotesque limbs ensnared Lumian's ankles, striving to haul him into the nebulous depths.

Amid this peril, a figure emerged from the inky depths—a half-naked, metallic-finished Guillaume Bénet.

Shadow Burial was a form of shadow concealment for him!

By capitalizing on three Light Incarnations—which consumed a large amount of spirituality—to veil his position, thereby detaining Lumian temporarily, Guillaume Bénet engineered his stealthy approach via the shadows, orchestrating a decisive assault.

His body suddenly expanded as he punched Lumian behind the ear.

A thunderous crack resonated as Lumian's form fragmented akin to a glass pane, fracturing into myriad minuscule fragments subsequently claimed by the pallid-white and obsidian-black arms.

Mirror Substitution!

It was precisely due to the implementation of Mirror Substitution that Franca refrained from intervening on Lumian's behalf when she saw him restrained by the strange arms extending from the shadow. Rather, she bided her time, anticipating Guillaume Bénet's advent to administer a terminal blow.

Amidst the cracking sounds, Franca's hooded, black-robed figure involuntarily appeared once more, quickly spotted by the padre.

Guillaume Bénet had been waiting for this opportunity to stop himself from being affected by the charm and turn his blue eyes light-colored again.

He saw the mercurial river of fate and began to choose the fate of being paralyzed by the burning gasses of the Abyss Demon Flowers.

Yet, an abrupt surge of peril seized Guillaume Bénet's consciousness, compelling a stark realization: interference with the adversary's fate would undoubtedly yield cataclysmic repercussions.

Impossible! Moments earlier, such consequences hadn't arisen! Yet, as he scrutinized the figure before him, Guillaume Bénet, who had been able to interfere with his target's fate normally previously to near success, saw a hooded woman hiding behind the hooded woman. The woman behind her held a palm-sized mirror that illuminated his figure.

In an instant, Guillaume Bénet understood what was going on.

The hooded woman standing in front of him, revealing the river of fate, was Lumian Lee!

After activating Mirror Substitution, he took the initiative to appear in front of his companion. Seizing the opportunity, he used a Transfiguration-like ability to change his appearance and disguise himself as his companion!

You do realize, using the same trick won't work twice? Franca, who was hiding behind Lumian, chuckled when she saw this.

Seeing Lumian under attack, she took out her teammate's Mirror Substitution and threw it in front of her. Taking advantage of the cover and the enemy's drawn attention, she aimed another mirror at Guillaume Bénet.

Without hesitation, Franca's palm was enveloped in black flames as she swiped the mirror's surface.

Curse!

Demoness's Curse!

In a simultaneous eruption, a quietly smoldering black flame ignited from within Guillaume Bénet's metallic form.

Elated that his Steel Body rendered him impervious to conflagration, inflicting only minor wounds, he soon perceived an anomalous drain on his spirit, coupled with indications of severe ethereal scorching.

In the span of an eye's flutter, the Cordu village padre emitted a tormented cry.

Instantaneously, his metallic semblance plummeted to the earth with a cacophonous clatter, reconstituting into a form unadorned by metal, starkly naked

and manifestly fleshy.

At the same time, Franca, too, experienced a visceral tremor, her countenance assuming a pallid hue.

“Rebirth!”

The contract ability in question facilitated Guillaume Bénet’s revival within the slayer’s body!

Guillaume Bénet’s spirit smiled and hastened to replace the woman holding the mirror and take control of her body.

Yet, he confronted a disconcerting reality: before him stood an enshrouded woman brandishing a mirror, baring her lower visage in a manner reminiscent of malevolent allure.

She’s in front… Then whose body did I Rebirth into? A disorienting befuddlement inundated Guillaume Bénet.

Meanwhile, Lumian, ensconced within Franca’s semblance, donned a knowing grin, gradually retracting his right palm from the padre’s lifeless cadaver, the Decency brooch aglow with a dusky-golden luminescence.

Distortion!

How could he not guard against Guillaume Bénet’s Rebirth ability when he already knew that Guillaume Bénet’s mistress had chosen such an ability?

Lumian couldn’t overtly commandeer Guillaume Bénet’s Rebirth with his seal and corruption alone. Nevertheless, Lumian, resembling Franca with uncanny precision, had already instructed Franca to bring the Earth Blood ore.

Innately repellent to even the Montsouris ghost, the Earth Blood ore imposed an unseen force field compelling Guillaume Bénet’s Spirit Body’s circumvention.

Leveraging the Distortion afforded by the Decency brooch, coupled with the Earth Blood ore’s obstructive efficacy and the Niese Face’s transformation, Lumian orchestrated Guillaume Bénet’s Rebirth within his very body!

Although Lumian’s visage paled and his frame quivered slightly, a smile graced his lips as he extended his hand towards his left chest, gently declaring, “Padre, everyone is waiting for you.”

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Chapter 331 - 331 Spirit Channeling

331 Spirit Channeling

As Lumian's words reverberated, an inexplicable chill settled over Guillaume Bénet, even in his Spirit Body form.

There, a colossal, semi-transparent vortex unfurled, ensconced in a wispy gray fog at its nadir. Within this haze materialized a dimly lit village, populated by spectral forms.

One of these apparitions gazed skyward, noticing Guillaume Bénet's struggle against the vortex's inexorable pull.

His pale-white face instantly lit up with excitement and fanaticism as he shouted, "Oh, my deity, my lord, you're here too?

"Quickly, join us! Hasten your approach!"

The figure belonged to Guillaume Bénet's brother, Pons Bénet.

Sensing Pons Bénet's abnormality, the figures lingering in the dim village looked up at Guillaume Bénet.

Among them, Madonna Bénet, Philippa Guillaume, and the others, who had once been Guillaume Bénet's mistresses, extended their pale-white arms to the sky and smiled blankly.

"Quickly, join us! Hasten your approach!"

Immediately after, Shepherd Pierre Berry, Lumian's comrade Guillaume Berry, Azéma Lizier, and more added their supplicating gestures.

In an instant, a peculiar, pallid forest seemingly sprouted from within the village's dim enclave, its spectral denizens directing their palms towards the padre.

Guillaume Bénet's descent escalated, his Spirit Body verging on fragmentation.

Struggling to counteract the vortex's pull, he sought to resist its sway, aiming to evade its dominion and flee Lumian's profoundly perilous vessel.

He couldn't care less about the Rebirth in the other party's body and the corresponding fate.

That was something he couldn't bear!

Lumian's grin expanded, seemingly attuned to the cacophony of terror and anguish echoing within his own body.

Indeed, possessing him via Rebirth and forcing a possession by luring others over via the Summoning Dance were completely different treatments!

The former would form a connection with his fate and, in an attempt to replace it, it would inevitably trigger the seal. Guillaume Bénet's profound corruption by Inevitability meant that the resonance of this seal's potency was inevitable.

Though Lumian remained ignorant of the precise ramifications, he intuited they would bode ill.

Perceiving Guillaume Bénet's vehement longing to extricate himself, Lumian opted to refrain from thwarting his escape, willingly relinquishing any interference.

Ultimately, Guillaume Bénet—having expended a considerable amount of his spirituality—struggled to escape from Lumian's body.

A dark-golden glimmer traversed his chest, heralding Guillaume Bénet's emergence within the palm-sized mirror clasped in Franca's grasp.

Franca's palm coalesced an unblemished frost, which she spread over the mirror's surface.

Instantaneously, Guillaume Bénet's form became ensconced within a veneer of ice, ensnared within the mirror's confines.

Concurrently, Franca summoned black flames, which enshrouded the icy enclosure.

Though the ice in itself was inadequate to bar a Spirit Body's escape from the mirror, the shrouding black flames bore that capability. Should Guillaume Bénet dare venture beyond the ice's protection, the flames awaited to engulf him.

With Guillaume Bénet's Spirit Body securely sealed, Franca glanced up at Lumian —who had removed the paper balls—and directed, "Channel his spirit after we're out. Your flames and anesthetic gas are everywhere."

With her physique and expenditure, holding on for another two or three minutes sans Mirror Substitution posed no undue challenge. Nonetheless, she sensed Lumian reaching his threshold.

Affirming Franca's directive with a nod, Lumian briskly pivoted and surged towards the Bottle of Fiction's exit.

Consequent to Guillaume Bénet's "demise," the concealed trap had naturally been lifted.

Having returned to the sacrificial hall, Lumian promptly dissipated the Niese Face, reverting his appearance from that of Franca's hooded visage and black robe.

His upper body bore the telltale markings of being charred, yet owing to his skillful management following the initial digestion of the Pyromaniac potion, his trousers remained unscathed.

This approach, evoking pain, stimulating cerebral activity, and rousing his senses, didn't necessitate subjecting his entire form to incineration—localized scorching proved sufficient.

Observing his somewhat unconventional appearance, Franca—torn between concern and amusement—chimed in with an air of teasing, "Do you have a penchant for masochism? You go through this ordeal every time you engage in combat."

Lumian directed his attention toward the mirror ablaze in Franca's grip and casually responded, "That's how Hunters are."

"I'd be deluding myself if I bought into your fabrications. I'm an Instigator, after all!" Franca had borne witness to prior Pyromaniac skirmishes.

Witnessing their conversational exchange, Jenna deduced that their adversary had been ensnared and the situation had reached its resolution. Thus, she emerged from the concealment of the shadows.

Franca graced her with a smile before turning her attention back to Lumian, relaying, "Hold on for a moment. Don't fret. Guillaume Bénet isn't entirely dead yet. Once the Rebirth effect wanes, he'll morph into a recently expired spirit, his faculties adrift. At that juncture, channeling his spirit will prove less hazardous, and we can be sure he doesn't lie."

Lumian calculated the remaining duration of the Decency brooch's efficacy and remarked, "Let's wait here."

Leveraging the mystical knowledge gleaned from the boon, he discerned that the Rebirth effect endured merely two minutes—its termination was imminent.

Abandoning their current location to embark on a quest for a more secure locale for spirit channeling would necessitate identifying another concealed setting, subjecting Lumian to an additional hour of repulsion before spirit channeling could ensue.

The optimal time frame for spirit channeling would subsequently elapse.

Moreover, Lumian harbored a reluctance to further procrastinate.

Stepping toward the altar, she set the mirror upon the pitch-black ring symbol crafted from thorns, thereby maintaining the enshrouding black flames.

This facilitated Lumian's observation.

Fixated on Guillaume Bénet's pale and ashen visage, ensnared beneath the duality of black flames and ice, Lumian smirked with brilliant satisfaction gradually etched upon his lips. He uttered, "You're truly foolish!

"If I were you, I'd evade and refrain from launching an assault post Steel Body activation, awaiting the adversary's inevitable fatigue.

"Ah, I neglected to apprise you. My spirituality has plummeted below the safety threshold, thereby making spirit world traversal or even utilization of the Spell of Harrumph impossible. I'm barely able to kindle fire, changing my face, and using the brooch. Should you have bided your time, I would've neared my limit and fainted on the spot.

"I acted rashly and reacted relatively slowly towards the end. On the one hand, I didn't want to expend more spirituality and wanted to save them for critical moments. On the other hand, Mirror Substitution consumed Franca's spirituality. On the other hand, heh heh, it was a trap for you.

"Do you remember the flaming flower? Without this 'gift' to complete Bribe, Franca's curse wouldn't have been able to kill you, a Sequence 5…"

Upon hearing the term Spell of Harrumph and recalling Lumian's actions of knocking out two fake Guillaume Bénets in a row, Franca's eyelids twitched in shock and confusion.

Jenna looked at Lumian, who kept mocking the Spirit Body in the mirror, and tugged at Franca with a measure of concern. She whispered, "Perhaps we should attempt to assuage him?"

"No need." Franca shook her head and took the initiative to distance herself from Lumian, giving him a "private" space to vent.

Jenna tersely acknowledged and followed Franca to the edge of the sacrificial hall, casting a lingering glance at the visage of pallid, pale-white and ashen hues reflected within the mirror.

Guillaume Bénet emanated a mixture of hostility, terror, and ultimately—despair.

…

Dill brothel, sixth floor.

On a distant balcony, Albus positioned himself in a discreet corner, his concealed gaze unwaveringly fixed upon Room 602.

Once Lumian and his companions had seemingly "teleported" away, Albus stepped out from his concealment, a wry smile tugging at his lips.

To think a mere Sequence 7 individual wields an artifact that enables traversal of the spirit world?

His connection with Red Boots isn't simple. Whether Gardner Martin is privy to this or remains in the dark, I wonder…

As he muttered, Albus's smile carried a hint of ambiguity and playful intrigue.

…

50 Rue Vincent, underground sacrificial hall.

Lumian's continuous taunting endured until the Rebirth effect gradually subsided, a shadow darkening Guillaume Bénet's eyes.

Meanwhile, Franca, intently calculating the elapsed time, positioned herself near the altar and erected a wall of spirituality, priming herself for the forthcoming endeavor.

With the moment at hand, she softly intoned the incantation, engaging her self-devised Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell.

Yet, just as success appeared imminent, Lumian summoned the Decency brooch's Distortion once again, rerouting the inquiry of the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell toward himself.

In a final bid for success within a singular attempt, he even invoked the Niese Face, transfiguring into Franca once more.

Almost instantaneously, the mirror's surface dimmed, casting Guillaume Bénet's pale visage into a slightly blurred disposition.

With his capacity to sustain the Niese Face dissipated, Lumian reverted to his original form and shifted his focus back to Guillaume Bénet.

"Who led you to place faith in Inevitability?"

Although Franca harbored a degree of curiosity, she was mindful of the repercussions of Lumian broaching forbidden topics, thus jeopardizing her corruption. Subsequently, she parted the wall of spirituality, positioning herself at a distance from the altar.

Guillaume Bénet, in a somewhat dazed state, responded, "It was Aurore Lee!

"Upon discovering that the faith of an accursed deity was disseminating, she covertly approached me, affirming that I could harness superpowers without supplicating the bishops. Moreover, I was assured of the prospect of obtaining godhood in the future, potentially ascending to the rank of saint and thereby securing eternal life.

“At the time, I remained skeptical. Nevertheless, my curiosity compelled me to withhold judgment. Over time, however, I witnessed her burgeoning might, my reservations gradually subsiding.”

After a brief lull, Lumian inquired, his blue gaze intense, “Who influenced Aurore Lee to embrace Inevitability?”

“I don’t know.” Guillaume Bénet’s bewilderment was palpable as he shook his head.

Following a moment of contemplation, Lumian continued his line of questioning, “What profound impression did Aurore Lee leave upon you?”

Guillaume Bénet’s countenance shifted, a semblance of recollection mingling with apprehension.

“S-she said that she wasn’t Aurore Lee!”

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Chapter 332 - 332 Sinners

332 Sinners

She said she wasn't Aurore Lee? Lumian felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck him, his thoughts freezing in their tracks.

In fact, he could deduce that Aurore Lee wasn't his sister's real name. Someone deliberately settling in a border village wouldn't likely use their true identity. Yet, after almost six years together, he could sense that his sister embraced the name "Aurore Lee." She never spoke of her original identity or her past life in his presence. Moreover, the forged identity documents she possessed seemed increasingly genuine. When she rose to fame as a best-selling author, their authenticity was unquestionable.

Why would she suddenly say that?

And how did it tie into her inexplicable faith in the enigmatic existence known as Inevitability?

A sharp ache throbbed in Lumian's head, jolting him back to reality. Anxiously, he inquired, "Did she mention who she was?"

On the mirror-like surface, no longer shrouded in black flames and frost, Guillaume Bénet, pallid and tinged with a bluish hue, responded with a dazed expression, "She claimed to be Roche Louise Sanson."

I've never heard of such a name… Lumian furrowed his brow and probed further, "Did she mention anything else about this identity?"

Guillaume Bénet shook his head.

"Nothing more."

Lumian pressed his left hand against his temple. After a brief silence, he pressed on, "Was Roche Louise Sanson involved in the plot to sacrifice Cordu in exchange for the arrival of the Inevitability angel?"

Guillaume Bénet appeared to wrestle with himself, but ultimately yielded to the sway of the spirit channeling. His response came forth, candid and unfiltered: "No, that was my doing.

"I was driven by the desire to attain godhood swiftly, to ascend as a saint. Aurore Lee initially approved, only to oppose my plan mere hours later. She was indecisive. Eventually, I chose to conceal my intentions from her and made covert

preparations. Later on, she seemed to tacitly endorse our efforts, offering aid during critical junctures. Occasionally, though, she resisted and engaged in acts of destruction, yet she'd quickly relent."

The Aurore you depict almost seems schizophrenic… Lumian found himself clinging to the image of Aurore, yet he couldn't escape the memory of the lizard-like, diaphanous elf emerging from his sister's mouth. He recalled her sporadic awakenings, her discussions on escaping their predicament.

But even in those moments of "clarity," Aurore's behavior hardly resembled normalcy. She even overlooked the option of summoning Hela's messenger for swift assistance, the most direct solution out of their ordeal.

Lumian shifted the conversation, asking, "When did Aurore begin propagating the faith of Inevitability in Cordu?"

Guillaume Bénet appeared even more muddled than before.

"My initial investigation pointed to around May or June of last year. After that, she paid me a secret visit."

Seems to be consistent with my suspicions… Something must have transpired back then to corrupt Aurore… If she was an original believer in Inevitability, she wouldn't wait five or six years before proselytizing… Lumian's expression flickered with pain, which he quickly suppressed.

"Have you ever come across diaphanous, lizard-like creatures in Cordu?"

"No," Guillaume Bénet answered truthfully.

"Do you have any knowledge of a figure known as the Sufferer in Cordu?" Lumian inquired further.

Guillaume Bénet appeared taken aback.

"I don't know. No."

Lumian's facial muscles twitched involuntarily.

"Have you observed an owl around Aurore?"

"No," Guillaume Bénet negated again.

Lumian continued to pose inquiries regarding the Cordu catastrophe, yet the answers offered were far from satisfactory. Finally, he probed, "Is there a secret organization or a heretical Church associated with Roche Louise Sanson?"

Guillaume Bénet, his pallid countenance increasingly diffused, finally nodded.

"Yes, it's called Sinners. I now hold the position of one of the Sinners' archbishops."

Sinners… The heretical Church which believes in Inevitability? Lumian's intrigue grew as he delved further.

"Who leads the Sinners, and who acts as the intermediary for you?"

"I'm uncertain of the leader's identity, but he's the sole individual among all the sinners who possesses godhood," Guillaume Bénet's hollow voice responded with an eerie timbre. "The individual responsible for my contact is Bouvard Pont-Péro."

Sole individual possessing godhood… Could it be the Sufferer lurking in my midst? Lumian's mind raced as he continued his probing.

"How can I establish contact with Bouvard Pont-Péro?"

"It's futile," Guillaume Bénet's ethereal voice replied, a hollowness to its tone. "Upon my demise, he will sense the shift in fate and preemptively erase all traces. Transfiguration is one of the abilities granted through a pact. He can become anything, but he is no longer himself."

Can take on any form, but at the cost of his own identity… Prolonged use of Transfiguration might have driven him to complete madness… Perhaps I can visit the asylum and seek out any patients with similar cognitive impairments… I must be careful with acquiring further contract abilities. If there are only three or four negative effects, that's manageable. However, if the list becomes extensive, it not only invites trouble but also provides enemies with exploitable openings… If the padre had encountered a member of the Bliss Society or a bestowed from the Mother Tree of Desire, he would undoubtedly fall victim easily… Lumian gazed at the altar mirror and posed another question, "Why did the Sinners organization send you to Quartier de la Princesse Rouge?"

Guillaume Bénet's indistinct visage lit up with zealous fervor.

"It satisfies my desires and simultaneously serves as a recruitment ground for believers, all in preparation for the upcoming grand ritual. Only by allowing our lord to tread upon this realm can sinners like us seek redemption and baptism, thus escaping our predetermined fates."

"Did the Sinners organization provide you financial support, or did you amass funds independently?" Lumian aimed to trace the origins of the money for potential leads.

Guillaume Bénet shook his head.

"It's an anonymous deposit from Aurore Lee—no, Roche Louise Sanson. The sum totals 100,000 verl d'or."

"Dammit, you swine!" Lumian cursed.

While he had foreseen this, the realization that the padre had been using Aurore's earnings to support a courtesan and sustain a lavish lifestyle for recruiting heretics ignited a seething anger within Lumian.

Suppressing his emotions, Lumian let out a scornful chuckle and stated, "Did the Sinners organization not provide you Beyonder characteristics? Have you never consumed a potion?"

Otherwise, the padre would have been even more formidable and difficult to deal with.

"Beyonder characteristics of the Seer, Monster, Apprentice, and Marauder pathways that Inevitability's bestowed are compatible with aren't easily acquired. I've been searching for them.

"Given the adverse effects those contracted creatures have on me, drinking potions from other pathways would undoubtedly lead to a loss of control on the spot."

Fortunately, my current negative effects remain minimal and feeble. If they were more potent, it could jeopardize my ability to ingest Hunter pathway potions in the future… Lumian's spirituality was dwindling, so he capitalized on the moment to pose one final inquiry.

"What are Sequences 6 to 0 of the Inevitability pathway?"

Guillaume Bénet's voice hollowed further.

"Sequence 6 is Ascetic, Sequence 5 is Fate Appropriator, Sequence 4 is Circle Inhabitant, and Sequence 3 is Sufferer. Beyond that, I am unaware."

Ascetic… It seems akin to the advancement of an Alms Monk… Why didn't Termiboros inform me? Right; as a victim, He will likely have the Ascetic boon extracted from Him in the future. It's only natural for Him to evade answering related queries. If He remained utterly impassive and too willing to provide an answer, I would have grown wary and suspected a trap… Lumian's gaze lifted slightly, his countenance involuntarily contorting.

"What abilities does an Ascetic possess?"

Guillaume Bénet's voice drifted as he responded, "An Ascetic is defined by endurance, accumulation, and eruption. After accruing one's usual strength within the body, it can be momentarily unleashed during combat, rendering the Ascetic akin to a giant. Accumulating ritualistic processes permits the simplification of certain special rituals, making them applicable in combat."

Akin to a giant… A momentary outburst… Lumian recollected the confrontation between Shepherd Pierre Berry and the investigator, Ryan, along with the metallic giant the padre had morphed into.

Had the metalized Guillaume Bénet not been overly cautious of the Spell of Harrumph and abstained from close-quarter combat, constantly maintaining a safe distance and shifting positions swiftly, thereby thwarting Franca's Psychic Piercing, by amalgamating Steel Body with Ascetic, the padre could have likely outmatched Lumian, who needed to use his spirituality judiciously.

This corroborated Lumian's rationale for disregarding the strange creatures that came with the boon's knowledge and opting to identify a contract target from the spirit world bestiary. If he hadn't, the padre would have been able to determine if the Spell of Harrumph was still at Lumian's disposal and gauging his remaining combat strength. In that scenario, his adversary's battlefield decisions would probably have starkly diverged from the ultimate outcome.

Guillaume Bénet had earlier "shared" details of the simplified ritual.

By enveloping an individual in sheepskin through ritualistic accumulation and intoning the incantation, they could be transmuted into a sheep. A cumbersome and intricate ceremony was unnecessary.

Just as Lumian was on the cusp of inquiring about the abilities of a Sufferer, an acute pang surged through his head, thwarting his continuation.

A pang of disappointment ensued, albeit one he could accept. Had Franca not devised the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell, Lumian wouldn't have been able to amass such a wealth of answers through his line of questioning.

Lumian engaged his Spirit Vision and concluded the spirit channeling. He took deep breaths as Guillaume Bénet's spirit drifted out of the mirror.

Having calmed down, Lumian suddenly extended his right palm, capturing the padre's Spirit Body.

Though his grasp couldn't control the intangible entity, crimson flames surged forth from Lumian's palm, immolating the already fragile spirit of Guillaume Bénet.

Amid the flames, which burned fiercer than the noonday sun, Lumian watched the apparition writhe instinctively, a pained visage etched upon it. A faint smile curved Lumian's lips as he proclaimed, "Praise the Sun!"

Momentarily bewildered, Guillaume Bénet's form swiftly disintegrated within the flames.

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Chapter 333 - 333 Gains

333 Gains

Lumian's smile gradually softened as he watched the Spirit Body writhing and wailing within the flames.

This was one of the ways the padre died as he had predicted.

Certainly, when he initially ignited the Abyss Demon Flowers, transforming the derelict mine within the Bottle of Fiction into a fiery inferno, he hadn't anticipated Guillaume Bénet's direct incineration.

During that moment, he had relied on his combat instincts and seasoned experience to create an environment that favored his strengths and mitigated his most vulnerable points. The summoning of the Abyss Demon Flowers by the padre had presented an opportunity.

The anesthetic gas produced by the incineration of the Abyss Demon Flowers wasn't his intention. His aim was to battle within an infernal hell.

During that period, his remaining spirituality had been scarce. Nonetheless, a Pyromaniac's resistance to flames significantly outclassed a Fate Appropriator's. Moreover, this resistance was a physical attribute that didn't deplete his spirituality.

As the Bottle of Fiction transformed into a blazing inferno, even the very air could scorch the trachea and lungs. Lumian believed he would ultimately prevail. He could outlast Guillaume Bénet, enduring until the flames extinguished themselves due to lack of fuel.

With his grasp of the Inevitability pathway, and in the absence of unforeseen deviations for Sequence 6 Beyonders, Guillaume Bénet's constitution was merely more robust than that of an ordinary person. His strength lay in his flexibility and tolerance, rather than fire resistance.

Lumian's observations during the Cordu confrontations validated this point. Both Guillaume Bénet and Pierre Berry, individuals who had clearly progressed beyond Sequence 7, exhibited remarkable combat capabilities, albeit lacking commensurate defensive attributes.

Lumian hadn't anticipated the padre contracting the Steel Body ability. This ability possessed pros and cons. On the one hand, it thwarted Lumian's initial plan for an infernal hell. On the other hand, it curtailed the padre's own capabilities, granting Lumian an opportunity to contend more effectively and unseal the entrance to the

Bottle of Fiction. This would permit his accomplice to join the fray and offer assistance. Lumian subsequently exploited Guillaume Bénet's determination to eliminate unnecessary obstructions by dealing with Franca first. He then improvised, crafting a lethal snare.

Amidst the sizzle of burning air, Guillaume Bénet's wailing Spirit Body disintegrated swiftly, gradually dissipating.

With the task accomplished, Lumian pivoted, acknowledging Franca and Jenna with a nod, signifying his completion.

In the ensuing instant, he staggered toward the altar, retrieving the skins of cow, sheep, and dog.

These items were whole, exuding a sinister aura upon closer inspection.

These constituted specialized hides, amassed through the initial half of the Animal Creation Spell ritual, harnessed by leveraging Ascetic powers for accumulation. Upon grasping the corresponding incantation and enveloping individuals and oneself with these skins, the Animal Creation Spell could be executed outright.

Although Lumian hadn't yet deciphered the predetermined incantation for animal creation or its nullification, these obstacles could be surmounted in due course. He could, for instance, detain Paulina, the padre's butler, and others to determine if they possessed such knowledge. Alternatively, he could engage a Cryptologist of the Marauder pathway to decode the incantation. He could even resort to trial and error, applying his knowledge of the Inevitability domain and his comprehension of Guillaume Bénet's persona. Last of all, he could use divination to get any clarity on success.

Thus, these two sheepskins, a single cowhide, and two dogskins held considerable value. Employed judiciously, they could unleash unparalleled effects. Guillaume Bénet had nearly beguiled Lumian previously by adopting the guise of a massive, brown-furred dog, attempting to flee Rue Vincent and sever their destined encounter. However, his fanaticism in Inevitability's boon and his greed due to his contract had overridden reason. This led him to transition from prey to hunter, setting a trap in reverse.

When Lumian's body began to sway as if he had lost his footing, Franca and Jenna lent their support, each helping him bear a share of the cow, sheep, and dog skins.

In that instant, the Bottle of Fiction quaked.

Stripped of Guillaume Bénet's reinforcement and subjected to the infernal hellfire for a duration, it eventually fractured akin to ice, its fragments plunging into the void.

The derelict cavern, encompassed by its confinement, unveiled itself to Lumian and his companions through the secret door. All the Abyss Demon Flowers had been reduced to ashes and strewn across the ground. The flames had exhausted their combustibles, and bereft of Lumian's spirituality, most had dwindled to

cinders. Only select regions persisted with a crimson luminescence, which was waning steadily.

Lumian glanced at Franca and said, “I’ll head back to Rue des Blouses Blanches through Underground Trier. Carry the Earth Blood ore as you make your way to the surface.”

Once the Decency brooch was removed, Lumian would inevitably be scorned by those around him. Should he retrace his steps, numerous mishaps could befall him. Alternatively, if he didn’t remove it, an alert would be triggered within two to three minutes, attracting the attention of nearby official Beyonders or concealed factions.

Given the potential complications involved in carrying the Earth Blood ore into the underground, coupled with the possible difficulties Jenna might encounter upon receiving it, Franca nodded, pursing her lips, and turned toward Jenna. “Follow Ciel. He’s at his limit. He might not even stand a chance against a dog.”

“If it’s the same dog as before, I wouldn’t be able to defeat it,” Lumian muttered.

As the exit on the opposite side of the abandoned mine remained unobstructed, a frigid gust swept into the sacrificial hall, dispersing the anesthetic gas with the fragmentation of the Bottle of Fiction. Lumian staggered onward, arriving at the charred remains of Guillaume Bénet.

He kicked the body and turned it over, ensuring nothing was concealed within.

Lumian picked up the iron-gray military alcohol flask and advanced toward the abandoned mine’s exit. There, he noticed a brown-furred dog skin that no longer bore a sinister aura.

This particular area had avoided incineration, leaving the dog skin intact. Nevertheless, the process of reconstituting the Animal Creation Spell ritual was mandatory. Only through the application of an Ascetic’s ability could it regain its status as a Beyonder item.

Beyond the abandoned mine’s exit, two objects were propped against the rocky wall.

One comprised a kerosene-lit lantern, while the other was a dark-green canvas backpack favored by adventurers and mercenaries.

Lumian hoisted the backpack, finding it surprisingly weighty. It was almost too heavy to lift.

Curious, Franca crouched down and unfastened the backpack. Within it lay gratifying gold bars, stacks of banknotes, and golden coins.

“Wow!” Franca exclaimed.

So much money? Lumian's initial thought was: Thank goodness, the padre didn't expend all of Aurore's accrued royalties. This was followed by a rather visceral reaction: F*cking dammit, this man is so sinister!

Evidently, Guillaume Bénet had anticipated the possibility that Paulina and the others might not escape. In such an eventuality, Lumian and his companions could deduce that the padre had chosen an alternate escape route based on the scarce funds carried by these Inevitability believers. Consequently, they would converge on the basement, inadvertently walking into a trap.

"Not too shabby, not at all," Franca remarked, grinning. "While these heretics might not drop characteristics, they do drop other spoils."

Indicating upward with her hand, she continued, "I'm heading back up. Pass me this dog skin."

She relinquished the three ritualistic hides to Jenna and returned to 50 Rue Vincent, clutching Guillaume Bénet's dog skin.

Jenna slung the dark-green canvas bag over her shoulder, gripping the five sinister hides. She observed as Lumian picked up the lantern and kindled it.

After a few strides through the dim tunnel outside the abandoned mine, Lumian promptly removed the Decency brooch and placed it in another military alcohol flask hanging from his waist, sinking it to the bottom of the liquor.

Lumian took a few more steps before suddenly shuddering. He turned around, glancing at Jenna who was trailing behind.

Jenna, clasping the cow, sheep, and dog skins while toting the canvas bag, bore a somber expression, marked by repugnance. She struggled to speak, her voice faltering, "I-I can control myself. Dammit, I won't beat you up!"

Though Lumian was skeptical, he had no choice but to continue his journey.

After seven to eight minutes, he encountered an abandoned tunnel and settled into a corner, awaiting the dissipation of the Decency brooch's adverse effects. He seized the opportunity to rest and recuperate some of his spirituality.

…

The events that transpired at 50 Rue Vincent remained unknown to anyone as Franca methodically erased all evidence and conducted an anti-divination process in the manner befitting a Demoness.

Throughout this endeavor, she combed through every room. Vigilant against potential corruption, she refrained from delving too deeply, though her explorations yielded neither valuable clues nor significant items of interest.

Ultimately, she returned to the parlor on the ground floor, rousing the unconscious impostor Guillaume Bénet.

The imposter Guillaume Bénet gazed at the cloaked figure adorned in a black robe, a brown dog skin clutched within her grasp. For a fleeting moment, he experienced a sensation akin to being trapped within a dream, unable to awaken.

Franca emitted a soft chuckle.

“As you can see, we’ve killed that devil.”

In her eyes, the imposter Guillaume Bénet was no longer identical to the padre. He had become very unfamiliar.

Perhaps this was his true appearance.

“I-I…” The imposter Guillaume Bénet stammered in surprise and elation, “Are you here to aid me?”

“We’re Demon Hunters,” Franca fabricated. “What else can you tell us about this devil?”

Though her Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell enabled Lumian to glean extensive information from Guillaume Bénet, its reach had limitations. It could not cover every facet. Further inquiry into relevant individuals was imperative to avert the risk of overlooking crucial leads.

The imposter Guillaume Bénet found the shrouded woman before him remarkably affable. He contemplated briefly before responding, “Other than engaging in an affair with my wife and indulging in steak and mutton chops, there’s nothing particularly remarkable about that devil.

“Yes… I-it vanishes for one day each week before resurfacing without fanfare.”

Disappearing once a week? Franca acknowledged this detail and pursued further inquiries.

Having exhausted the potential for extracting additional information, she smiled and subtly instigated the imposter Guillaume Bénet.

“If I were in your position, I’d hastily depart this location. Your wife is akin to a devil.

“I would relocate any valuable possessions to regions where my identity remains unknown. I’d purchase a new residence, enter a fresh marriage, and embark on a new chapter.”

Guillaume Bénet’s heartbeat hastened, and his resolve to stand his ground waned.

In the ensuing moment, he observed the woman before him liquefy akin to melting ice.

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Chapter 334 - 334 Clues

334 Clues

In the abandoned tunnel, Lumian's eyes snapped open.

Unintended slumber had overtaken him, but it also served to rejuvenate his spirituality. At the very least, the pounding in his head had ebbed away, and the searing fire coursing through his veins, organs, and flesh had altogether abated.

Lumian's sight plunged into unadulterated darkness. His hands groped for the lantern that had been snuffed out, and after lighting it, he noticed Jenna. Clad in the guise of a female mercenary, she sat diagonally across from him. She reclined against the tunnel's wall, her gaze affixed to the dark-green canvas backpack and the five ritualistic hides splayed before her.

Sensing the corresponding motion, Jenna looked up at Lumian.

After scrutinizing him for a few seconds, she playfully jested, "Finally, you're no longer as annoying."

Have the negative effects of the Decency brooch been lifted? Lumian instinctively exhaled a sigh of relief.

Jenna's lips curled into a grin as she rose, hoisting the dark green canvas backpack onto her shoulder. She told Lumian, "Earlier, I entertained notions of beating you up and painting your face with dog poop while you slept. But I managed to restrain myself."

"Much appreciated," Lumian said, his gratitude tinged with sarcasm.

With the backpack slung casually over one shoulder, Jenna stooped to gather the five ritualistic hides. Her smile bore an air of leisure as she uttered, "You're welcome."

And with that, she strode toward the tunnel's exit, a smile dancing on her lips.

"Chalk it up to me treating you as a friend?"

You're mocking me again… Lumian grumbled under his breath, picking up the lantern before following suit.

…

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca, now dressed in her usual attire—a blouse and light-colored breeches—awaited Lumian and Jenna's return.

Her eyes traveled over Lumian's scorched upper body, and a grin formed on her lips.

"Jenna didn't take the opportunity to stab you a few times? Decency's negative effects aren't as potent as I'd imagined."

Jenna interjected before Lumian could respond, "For the first half-hour, it was a real struggle. I had to hide outside the tunnel where he was resting. Every few minutes, I checked for potential threats from below ground, the ceiling, or behind the rock walls. But even then, I seriously contemplated collapsing the tunnel and burying him alive."

That's not what you said just now… Lumian couldn't help but glance at Jenna.

For a moment, he couldn't tell if the Instigator was telling the truth in the abandoned tunnel or if she was telling the truth now.

Franca chuckled and gave Jenna a thumbs-up.

"That couldn't have been easy. You maintained your vigilance, even in a semi-enclosed, deserted tunnel. You anticipated attacks from below, the cave's ceiling, and the very walls surrounding him."

Jenna's brows relaxed, and her smug smile was unmistakable.

"You're always feeding me those horror tales, remember? Like hands emerging from the earth to grab ankles, bloody heads dangling from ceilings, or figures springing from walls to embrace the protagonist."

Every night's entertainment involves retelling horror stories to Jenna? Lumian glanced at Franca, sensing that her intentions might run deeper.

"See? Those stories have their uses!" Franca beamed.

Then she turned her attention to Lumian.

"Need a doctor?"

The burns appeared quite severe.

"No need. For a Pyromaniac, it's merely a minor scrape." Lumian refrained from mentioning that he would be fully recovered by 6 a.m. the following morning. "And if things worsen, I can always seek out Rat."

His nurtured Planter hadn't risen to the ranks of a Sequence 8 Doctor yet, so his assistance was rather limited at the moment.

Observing Lumian's lack of visible discomfort, Franca's concern lessened. She picked up the dark-green canvas backpack Jenna had left on the armchair and prepared to place it on the coffee table to meticulously tally their spoils.

Casually, Lumian pushed aside cups, plates, newspapers, and magazines that cluttered the table, creating enough space.

Glancing around, he noticed the magazine's title: Women.

It was a widely read weekly among middle-class Intisien women, showcasing Trier's latest fashion trends, lifestyle advice, and beauty tips. The Loen Kingdom had its own bootleg version, Ladies Aesthetic.

Lumian raised his head with a smile, and his gaze shifted to Franca, a playful question in his eyes:"Oh, you read such magazines?"

Franca pursed her lips and puffed out her chest in response: "What's wrong with me reading Women?"

After their brief exchange, Franca unzipped the backpack and removed banknotes, coins, and gold bars.

"Roughly 60,000 verl d'or," she assessed after a moment's calculation.

In a little over two months, the padre had managed to deplete 40,000 verl d'or of Aurore's savings. And all that without acquiring Beyonder characteristics or obtaining any mystical items… The more Lumian pondered, the more vexed he grew.

It wasn't that the padre lacked options for mystical items; rather, suitable ones were proving elusive. On the one hand, his status as a heretic warranted caution, limiting his exposure. He didn't frequent many mysticism gatherings, and thus remained ignorant about numerous aspects. On the other hand, his slew of contracted creatures came with many negative repercussions. Several mystical items would be counterproductive or perilous for him. Some might even bring about abrupt, fatal consequences.

Franca pondered for a moment before addressing Lumian and Jenna, "All the gold is Ciel's share. I'll take half of the remaining assets. Jenna, you and Anthony can divide the rest. Let's decide on the distribution once Anthony returns and we see what he's managed to acquire. Does that sound fair?"

This arrangement would allocate around 30,000 verl d'or to Lumian and 15,000 to Franca.

"I'm fine with that," Jenna responded with a hint of concern. "But Anthony still hasn't come back. Dammit, could something have happened to him?"

"If it were anyone else, I might suspect trouble, but Anthony is a Psychiatrist. He's highly skilled in reading people, so falling into a trap is unlikely for him. Plus,

he’s an experienced information broker. His tracking abilities are on par with mine or Ciel’s,” Franca explained with a smile. “Most importantly, while waiting for you two, I used Magic Mirror Divination to ensure his safety. Heh, it might actually be a good sign that he’s taking so long. It suggests he hasn’t lost his target and might have gained something.”

“Why do you have to explain so much instead of just saying you checked through divination?” Lumian quipped, finding amusement in the situation.

Franca made a tongue-clicking sound and chuckled.

“You don’t get it. This is about not solely relying on divination.”

She gestured toward the five ritualistic hides.

“Are those the components for the Animal Creation Spell? Can we use them?”

“At the moment, only I can utilize them,” Lumian replied, shaking his head. “And I haven’t obtained Guillaume Bénet’s preset incantation yet.”

Franca’s expression showed a tinge of disappointment as she settled into her recliner.

After a few seconds, her smile returned.

“By the way, I’ve discreetly informed the authorities using my contacts that a wanted criminal is hiding at 50 Rue Vincent. Once Guillaume Bénet’s death is confirmed, we should be eligible for a bounty of around 20,000. Should we stick to our initial plan for distributing that?”

Entrusting this task to Jenna wasn’t feasible. It could raise suspicions that Lumian Lee was among the people she associated with.

Anthony Reid, the information broker, was the most suitable choice, but his absence raised concerns. Franca worried that further delays might lead the police to uncover the situation at 50 Rue Vincent before they could claim the bounty.

Once Lumian and Jenna acknowledged the plan without objections, the trio settled in to await Anthony Reid’s return.

After a few minutes, the seated Lumian leaned forward, fixing his gaze on Franca and Jenna. In a measured tone, he said, “There’s a matter I need your analysis on.”

With Aurore’s affairs, he often found himself grappling with his emotions and straying from rationality. This was why he wanted to hear perspectives from Franca and Jenna.

One of them shared a connection with Aurore, yet their bond was markedly different from Lumian’s deep tie with Aurore. The other had no direct involvement, making their viewpoints invaluable in approaching the situation from diverse angles.

“Sure,” both Franca and Jenna responded in unison, adopting a professional demeanor by shifting their postures.

For the first time, Lumian recounted the events in Cordu. While he omitted certain details such as the Inevitability angel and anything related to the dreamscape, he provided an overview of the catastrophe. This encompassed Aurore’s unusual behavior, Louis Lund, Madame Pualis, Guillaume Bénet, and the rest.

Franca had some prior knowledge, but Jenna was largely unfamiliar with this narrative. As Lumian spoke, the underground singer of Salle de Bal Brise and apprentice actress at Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons found herself transported into a world that seemed both distant and strangely familiar.

While the notion of the Animal Creation Spell was already unnerving, they weren’t prepared for concepts like “men giving birth” and “babies scaling walls like birds.”

It was madness, utter madness!

Franca’s primary concern, however, revolved around Aurore’s transformation. She had harbored curiosity about Muggle’s death in Cordu but hadn’t dared to probe too deeply, fearing it might agitate Lumian.

Franca couldn’t believe it when she realized the source of the problem was Aurore. This didn’t match her impression of Muggle at all.

Aurore’s revelation that she wasn’t Aurore Lee in the presence of Guillaume Bénet caught Franca off guard. Her initial surprise morphed into a grave expression.

Soon, Lumian narrated the concluding sacrificial ritual. Aurore’s sudden awakening within the altar and her act of shoving him to safety allowed him to survive.

In response to this account, Franca abruptly rose from her seat.

Baffling Lumian and Jenna with her actions, she hurried to her bedroom, returning with a stack of papers in hand.

These were Aurore’s grimoires, transcribed by Lumian who harbored a suspicion that something might be awry. He had hoped Franca could offer insights.

The papers were spread across the coffee table, and Franca extracted one sheet, her expression morphing into a blend of trepidation and seriousness. She began, “I think I know what’s wrong.”

Lumian looked over in surprise and saw that the notebook had a copy of the Warlock spell known as Soul Summoning.

A supplementary spell designed to aid spirits in separating from the flesh or to help Astral Projections find their spirits when adrift in the spirit realm.

Having previously studied the spell structure, Lumian had discerned no problematic elements. It wasn't associated with any evil god.

However, Franca's words carried a weight that demanded attention. Lumian directed his gaze to the spell once more, focusing on the date and its origin.

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Chapter 335 - 335 Another World

335 Another World

Lumian withdrew his focus from the grimoire and turned his attention to Franca.

“Is there a problem with that?”

He had meticulously studied the Soul Summoning Spell on numerous occasions. If there had been a problem, he should have uncovered it sooner.

His limitation lay in his inability to learn the spell and discern its ultimate effects. However, as a Pyromaniac, he didn’t possess the necessary capacity for such learnings, being incompatible with the corresponding Sequence.

Franca remained silent for a few seconds before speaking up, “What happens when the Soul Summoning Spell is used on others?”

“It enables a spirit to reunite with the body from which it was separated, providing a means to call back Astral Projections lost in the spirit world, thus offering an opportunity for reconnection with their physical forms,” Lumian began, describing the spell based on Aurore’s grimoire before offering a personal example for clarity. “In the previous battle, if I had been afflicted by Guillaume Bénet’s Soul Assimilation Mystic Spell, resulting in severe disorientation, the Soul Summoning Spell might have roused me from unconsciousness. Naturally, the premise here is that there exist Beyonders with the ability to learn and employ this spell.”

Franca disregarded Lumian’s answer and inquired with gravitas, “What if one were to employ it on oneself?”

What kind of question is that? Lumian pondered for a moment and asked, “It would be ineffective. If no signs of separation between spirit and body are evident, the spell would have no impact when cast on oneself. If there’s already a problem resembling such a condition, then one wouldn’t be able to employ any spells at all.”

“But what if, hypothetically…” Franca began before her words trailed off.

Jenna, observant and quick-witted, glanced at Franca, then at Lumian before rising from her seat and flashing a smile.

“We’ve been engrossed in discussion for quite a while. Aren’t you both feeling hungry? How about I get some afternoon tea?”

“Sure,” Lumian agreed on Franca’s behalf.

He sensed that Franca was on the brink of revealing something that might be problematic if Jenna caught wind of it. This was why she stopped short in the midst of speaking.

Lumian had already contemplated introducing Jenna to Mr. Fool's faith. They were comrades now, destined for numerous joint endeavors. In such scenarios, certain secrets couldn't be concealed, and in constantly doing so, would inevitably hinder collaboration.

As for whether to share information about the Tarot Club and Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian hadn't reached a conclusion.

After careful consideration, he determined that preaching to Jenna would be more fitting once she became a Witch. Her Sequence was still too low, and she lacked the strength to shoulder the weight of such knowledge. Too much information could make her vulnerable and inadvertently divulge secrets. However, Sequence 7 Witches of the Assassin pathway represented a qualitative transformation below the demigod tier, empowering Jenna to fend for herself.

While Lumian remained unfamiliar with the Sequence 5 of this particular pathway —its name and the Beyonder powers it encompassed—he believed that a Sequence 6 Demoness of Pleasure didn't manifest a drastic metamorphosis compared to a Witch. The latter could even alter an individual's gender, illustrating the considerable gap in their capabilities.

Franca's gaze followed Jenna's retreating figure until the sound of her gradually fading footsteps reached her ears. She settled into a cross-legged position on the recliner, emitting a soft sigh.

"It's not that Jenna couldn't know about this, but I'm concerned that it might make her fearful of me, that she'll distance herself and view me in a different way."

Lumian didn't pose the question: "Aren't you worried I might react similarly?" He retook his seat, patience etched on his features as he awaited Franca's explanation about the Soul Summoning Spell.

Franca's lips pursed, her demeanor wavering between hesitation and apprehension. After a beat, she chuckled self-mockingly.

"It's also why I sensed a dangerous aura in this matter—otherwise, I wouldn't have even thought about sharing this with you. I would have kept it to my grave. Uh, there's another reason too—your Spell of Harrumph's origins are of great significance to me. I hope you'll lay bare all the details with me, just as I'm about to disclose my secret to you.

"Sigh, we, members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, share one commonality—we all come from another world!"

With that, Franca slouched further into the recliner, seemingly drained of energy.

Observing a Demoness of Pleasure adopt such a posture inadvertently fueled a subtle warmth within Lumian, despite his thoughts being directed elsewhere.

“Another world?” Lumian echoed, genuine surprise coloring his voice.

This was an outcome that hadn’t even crossed his mind.

Such a possibility was one that ordinary individuals would scarcely contemplate and a rarity even within the confines of fiction.

In a fleeting moment, he sensed an odd alignment with this notion.

With a conscious effort to rein in his emotions, he inquired thoughtfully, “Is this the ‘home’ my sister often speaks of—the place she claims she can never return to?”

Initially, Lumian had surmised that his sister’s homeland had been ravaged by conflict or catastrophe, hence her assertion of being unable to return. Otherwise, armed with her Warlock strength, she could have surreptitiously revisited, even if she was being pursued by the entire world.

Subsequently, Lumian discovered Aurore’s status as a Trierien, causing him to find her references to an enigmatic “home” perplexing.

Franca’s expression shifted into one of complex emotions upon hearing Lumian’s question. Her countenance was a blend of wistfulness, melancholy, and sorrow.

“Does she frequently speak of ‘home’?” Franca inquired, her eyes briefly shuttered to mask the shifting emotions within.

Without awaiting Lumian’s reply, Franca’s lips pursed, and she continued, “Think of it as another planet or alternate dimension.”

Lumian dipped into his memories, muttering to himself, “No wonder she enjoys climbing up to the rooftop to gaze at the cosmos…”

“The cosmos…” Franca echoed with a sigh.

A hushed ambiance enshrouded Apartment 601 as Lumian and Franca delved into their introspective reveries.

After a pause, a memory resurfaced within Lumian’s mind.

Madam Magician had mentioned evil gods like the Mother Tree of Desire existing outside our world, separated by a barrier. These entities perpetually seek methods to breach that boundary.

Lumian’s gaze shifted toward Franca, and he voiced his thoughts, “Could it be that all of you are spawn of an evil god released into this world?”

“Pfft!” Franca immediately shook off her contemplative state. “Do we look anything like that to you?”

“No,” Lumian responded after a brief pondering, “You’re far too weak for the efforts of the evil gods to be expended in sending you here. They could have instead focused on sending more of Their saints. Or perhaps They are pinning Their hopes on your potential growth?”

After all, being weak had its own advantages. Infiltration through the barrier would be less likely to be detected.

Amused and slightly annoyed, Franca was tempted to refute his words, but tangible evidence eluded her grasp, leaving her with little recourse.

“In any case, I’ve come to believe in Mr. Fool. Not one member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society whom I’ve encountered shares faith in an evil god.”

“Even if they did, they might not reveal it to you…” Lumian muttered.

Franca ignored his comment and continued, “I also remain uncertain about the why behind our transmigration. I’ve been seeking an answer for quite some time. What I do know is that we arrived in this world as spirits and found ourselves reborn within other individuals’ bodies. It’s comparable to Guillaume Bénet’s process of Rebirth.”

Drawing on this analogy, Lumian effortlessly comprehended the situation of Franca and her companions in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

“In other words, you inhabit the bodies of other people?”

“Yes.” Franca cast a sidelong glance at Lumian, remarking, “Are you disheartened to learn that the sister you hold dear is essentially a wandering spirit occupying another’s body?”

“Why would I be disheartened?” Lumian responded casually. “Aurore Lee, the person who took me in and shared my life in Cordu for nearly six years, is my sister. I care not for the past of that body or its history.”

Franca seemed to seek Lumian’s perspective on her own behalf, “Don’t you find this situation morally dubious? Do you not consider your sister and me as thieves who appropriate the corpses and lives of others? Does this not present you with moral dilemmas or conflicts?”

“I have no morals,” Lumian replied calmly.

Expanding upon his statement, he added, “I show kindness to those who are kind to me.”

Franca’s mouth slightly agape, she struggled to find an immediate rejoinder.

Lumian glanced at her and said, “That person is already deceased. It’s a pragmatic use of available resources. If guilt weighs on you, treat her—no, his family well. Perhaps even fulfill some of his unfulfilled desires.”

“True.” Franca pressed her lips together, nodding in agreement.

Steering the conversation back to its initial trajectory, she inquired, “What might occur if individuals like us were to employ the Soul Summoning Spell on ourselves?”

“Could it summon a departed spirit? And if there’s an underlying issue with the spirit itself…” Lumian’s train of thought expanded abruptly.

Simultaneously, he recalled a line of inquiry introduced by Madame Hela, the vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

“Muggle’s parents and other relatives likely remain alive in this world. For some reason, she distanced herself from them and refrains from returning to Trier. It’s unclear whether there’s something amiss with them or if they’ve come into contact with heretics…”

Did Madame Hela already harbor suspicions? Lumian’s brows furrowed as he whispered,

“Could Roche Louise Sanson be the original boyd’s spirit? Is she and some of her family members associated with Inevitability, perhaps even linked to the Sinners organization?”

“Continuing our investigation in that direction is indeed a possibility,” Franca admitted after a moment’s contemplation. “Two other questions arise. Why did Muggle resort to the Soul Summoning Spell for herself? Did the April Fool’s member who sold her the spell foresee this outcome?”

Franca had chosen to share the secret of their transmigration with Lumian, sensing that something might be awry within the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and discerning an impending threat.

Lumian offered a subdued nod, his expression void of emotion. A subtle smile played upon his lips as he ventured, “You mentioned that April Fool’s Day was formed by members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who are disheartened by the future and seek only joy. Could it be that the individual who sold Aurore the Soul Summoning Spell hoped to experience such amusement?”

Franca fell into a brief contemplative silence before replying, “I don’t know. I’ll take charge of locating the April Fool’s member and delve into their motivations.”

Lumian offered a curt acknowledgment. “I’ll follow the trail of Roche Louise Sanson.”

With the conversation surrounding the Soul Summoning Spell concluded, an interim quiet settled within the living room of Apartment 601.

After a pause, Franca exhaled softly and told Lumian, “You can now tell me about the Spell of Harrumph.”

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Chapter 336 - 336 Armored Shadow's Origins

336 Armored Shadow's Origins

Lumian shifted his focus away from thoughts of Roche Louise Sanson, the Soul Summoning Spell, and April Fool's. He began recounting the tale from the very beginning, all at the behest of Franca.

"In the wake of the Cordu disaster, I found myself tainted by the corruption of the evil god, Inevitability. Fortunately, the protection granted to me by Mr. Fool allowed me to retain my sanity, preventing me from transforming into a monster.

"This corruption, a curse and yet a blessing, is now being extracted in stages, as per the instructions of Madam Magician. The aim is to channel this corruption into my own power, finding equilibrium with the corresponding Sequence Beyonder characteristic."

Franca was enlightened.

"So, what you were referring to as a 'special contract' is essentially the power of a Contractee? No wonder you mentioned it's impossible for me to learn it."

Since Lumian didn't know the powers of a Sequence 6 of the Inevitability pathway, she deduced his current state as a dual Sequence 7 Pyromaniac and Contractee.

Lumian nodded.

"That's why Guillaume Bénet doesn't dare to meddle with my fate recklessly. The degree of corruption within me is rather substantial."

A sudden revelation crossed Franca's mind. "To require Mr. Fool's safeguard, it means there must be godhood involved. Could there be a chance for me to receive similar boons?"

Do you want to give everything a shot? Lumian clicked his tongue and asked, "Are you prepared to seek out the Great Mother, engaging in daily cycles of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding? Alternatively, do you wish to put faith in the Mother Tree of Desire and drag stray dogs to bed?"

"Hiss…" Franca gasped and said, "I was merely musing. Engaging in the risky business of following an evil god is out of the question for me. The immediacy of gaining Mr. Fool's protection by merely brushing against the power of an evil god,

much like you, is a rarity indeed."

"This isn't a mere brush against power." To dispel Franca's unrealistic thoughts, Lumian divulged a little more. "The power of Inevitability is sealed within me. In essence, I beseech Mr. Fool and the corruption within me, for a boon instead of the entity known as Inevitability. This approach is pivotal for ensuring my very survival. Otherwise, I risk becoming unrecognizable or just dying abruptly."

Franca instinctively exhaled and said, "Just tell me about the Spell of Harrumph."

Lumian restructured his narrative, stating, "To prevent any indirect influences from Inevitability, I gave up the strange creatures that accompanied the knowledge bestowed by the boon. Instead, I obtained a wealth of information about creatures from the spirit world through Madam Magician. You know the rest.

"The Spell of Harrumph originates from a creature of the spirit world that I summoned. Initially, I aimed to summon the Shadow of Shriek. However, whether due to my invocation being witnessed by Mr. Fool or my summoning incantation lacking precision, I can't say for certain, but the entity I summoned greatly diverged from the description of the Shadow of Shriek…"

Lumian delineated the relevant summoning incantation, the concept driving its formulation, the Armored Shadow's visual attributes, and its array of capabilities, all in meticulous detail. He even used his barely-passable drawing skills to illustrate a rudimentary schematic.

Fish Scale Armor… Spell of Harrumph… Night Parade of Ten Thousand Demons… Soul Devouring Scream… Franca softly uttered these names to herself while gazing at the sketch on the coffee table, her gaze seemingly distant.

Lumian probed, "Is there an issue?"

Were Aurore present, would she also react in a similar fashion?

Franca snapped back to the present, her expression a blend of solemnity and exhilaration.

"That Armored Shadow might very well be from our world!"

"The world that you guys come from?" Lumian hadn't expected such an answer.

Yet, it made sense. The armor's design and the ability names bore a distinctive uniqueness, setting them apart from the present world.

Franca confirmed tersely.

"There are many countries in our world, and the culture and language of each country are different. The Armored Shadow is very similar to some entity in the myths and legends of the country your sister and I hail from."

“Are you from the same country as Aurore?” Lumian was most concerned about this.

He paused a beat before continuing, “Did Mr. Fool’s might, combined with my imprecise incantation, summon the Armored Shadow from your world? Or did he transmigrate long ago, much like you, eventually transforming into a spirit world shadow after his demise?”

Franca said excitedly, “If it’s the former, it could signify a bridge between our two worlds. This implies the potential for our return! If it’s the latter, the question arises: how did he use the capabilities of our original world? Did he bring these skills along, or did he acquire them at a later time?”

Resolving these mysteries would inch her closer to the truth of transmigration, potentially paving the path back home!

Franca rose from her seat, her eyes gleaming with intrigue as she faced Lumian.

“Can you summon the Armored Shadow? I’m keen to witness it firsthand.”

“I have a pact with him. The need to invoke Mr. Fool’s intervention is eliminated for precise summoning,” Lumian observed Franca’s evident enthusiasm, as though she was readying to assist in setting up the altar. Steering the conversation, he added, “Nonetheless, I perceive him to be immensely dangerous. While under Mr. Fool’s aegis, the danger is mitigated. However, if that protection wanes, we could well find ourselves killed by the shadow. Yet, should we remain sheltered by Mr. Fool, direct communication remains an impossibility, precluding spirit channeling. We can solely execute the summoning rite.”

Franca frowned in disappointment.

“What’s our course of action then?”

Lumian pondered for a moment and said, “Wait till I gather 100,000 verl d’or worth of gold and fulfill the contract.

“By doing so, the pact’s power shall act as our shield, enabling us to figure out why the Armored Shadow demands such a substantial sum.”

After a thoughtful pause that spanned nearly a minute, Franca finally exhaled.

“That’s all we can do for now.”

Initially, her intention had been to promptly corroborate the situation concerning the Armored Shadow and extract pertinent insights from it. Subsequently, she planned to inform the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, pooling their collective effort to unearth viable solutions. However, for the time being, she had no choice but to defer these actions.

After a period of immersion in the summoning incantation, it became evident that Franca's success rate in summoning was rather low, presumably due to an imprecise methodology. While it was possible that a Shadow of Shriek could be summoned, Lumian surmised that by omitting a particular descriptive line and using "Lumian Lee's contracted creature," the target could be pinpointed more precisely.

After a while, Jenna returned with a spread of coffee, treats, and meatloaf. The ravenous appetites that had ensued from their prior battle now found their solace in afternoon tea.

As evening approached, Anthony Reid, masquerading as a clerk, made his return to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"How did it go?" Lumian's concern was evident, unabashedly displayed.

With his weathered top hat set aside, Anthony nodded slightly.

"I trailed the lady, her butler, valet, maid, and carriage driver to 20 Rue de la Terrasse, within the library district.

"It appears to be an alternate residence of sorts, akin to a safe house."

Franca turned her gaze towards Lumian, inquiring, "Should we maintain surveillance?"

Lumian ruminated for a beat and then grinned.

"No need. Periodic checks to ensure they haven't left will suffice."

"Why?" Jenna had expected Ciel to rush to deal with them to gather more information.

Lumian's smile was radiant.

"Behind them stands an organization known as the Sinners. Their point of contact is likely aware of Guillaume Bénet's demise, prompting them to disengage and erase any traces, making investigation thorny.

"Yet, if the Sinners find that they had managed to evade our pursuit and that there's no surveillance, what might come to pass?

"Perhaps a connection will be reestablished!

"Only authentic non-surveillance can convince the Sinners that the issue has faded. They could then become active anew, crawling out from their rat's nest!"

Dammit… Jenna cursed silently.

Ciel is so sinister!

Anthony, having garnered significant intel, claimed two-thirds of the final 15,000 verl d'or, leaving Jenna with a share of 5,000.

As banknotes were deftly stowed away within assorted pockets, Anthony Reid turned his attention to Lumian.

"I'm eager to delve into the secrets surrounding Hugues Artois and the truth behind his treachery. I hope to begin the investigation soon."

This was the primary reason for his involvement in the operation.

"Very well." Lumian had already discussed this matter with Jenna and Franca.

Jenna was set to glean relevant details from the Purifiers.

As Franca was highly excited about the Armored Shadow matter, she took the initiative to suggest,

"I have acquaintances from Loen. I'll see if I can obtain a battle record from the Loen military. It might shed new light on the situation."

"That's a good idea." Anthony Reid's eyes lit up.

The notion of soliciting the truth directly from the attacker had not previously crossed his mind.

…

On Rue Anarchie's forever-bustling nights, Lumian, relinquishing the task of divining the incantations to Franca, walked towards Auberge du Coq Doré. There, his intent was to summon the messenger of Madam Magician, intending to relay matters regarding Guillaume Bénet, the Sinners organization, and the Armored Shadow. Concurrently, he hoped she could relay to Madam Justice and Madam Susie his readiness for their final therapy session.

Under the cool embrace of the night breeze, Lumian's thoughts unfurled languidly.

After learning from Franca about the shared trait among members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian's impression of Aurore crystallized.

Of course, the vagueness was something he didn't understand at first, but he deemed it of little consequence. Investigations were unwarranted.

It's no wonder that Aurore severed her familial ties to reside in Cordu, a frontier village. It's no wonder that she harbors a disinclination towards Trier. It's no wonder she always says strange words and likes to explain to me what they mean. It's no wonder her novels were different from the contemporary ones. It's no wonder she likes to say 'a certain philosopher from home once said' only to substitute it with 'Emperor Roselle once said'… Lumian ruminated in a wordless, contemplative cadence, a sensation of calm washing over him, as if he wasn't

strolling on Rue Anarchie but Cordu.

It was a place he could never return to.

Simultaneously, Lumian gained an understanding of the symbolic elements in the dream.

Aurore's acquisition of the land previously occupied by a deceased Warlock—could this embody her possession of Roche Louise Sanson's body?

Consequently, might the legendary Warlock, Roche Louise Sanson, symbolize the original adherents of Inevitability?

Mr. Poet failed to interpret the dual symbolic meanings because he lacked crucial information previously. He had solely indicated to Lumian that they likely bore their own significance.

As his thoughts raced, Lumian returned to Room 207 and saw a simple folded letter on the table.

Letter? This doesn't seem like Madam Magician's… Lumian walked over, alarmed and suspicious. He picked up the letter and unfolded it.

Two lines of elegant Intisian script graced the parchment:

"I have arrived in Trier.

"Hela."

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Chapter 337 - 337 Magician's Speculation

337 Magician's Speculation

Madame Hela has arrived in Trier? Lumian held the letter with a countenance etched in complexity.

She had advised Lumian to keep a vigilant watch over Muggle's familial roots, surmising it to be a promising avenue of investigation.

Sheer coincidence, or is there another reason? Lumian pondered briefly before easing into his seat. Beneath the carbide lamp's glow, he set pen to paper, commencing correspondence with Madam Magician.

In succinct prose, he relayed the day's occurrences, his discourse with Franca, and the conundrum of the Armored Shadow. While he withheld no mention of Hela's arrival, he refrained from disclosing the fact that the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's members hailed from an alternate world.

Approximately half an hour later, Lumian received a response from Magician:

"Giving up on the creature accompanying the boon and autonomously choosing a contract partner from the spirit world was a prudent choice. Your transition into an Inevitability Hunter, with the bestowed of the Inevitability pathway as your objective, proves that my subtle guidance bore fruit after all."

At this point, Lumian was a little puzzled.

When had Madam Magician ever hinted at forgoing the strange creatures that came with the boon?

Suddenly, a realization surged forth.

Before praying for a Contractee boon, unaware that the mystical knowledge it brought would encompass contract targets, Madam Magician had offered him information on creatures from the spirit world for his consideration.

It was indeed a hint, but did it have to be so subtle? Lumian mused that those skilled in divination or enamored with astromancy seemed averse to straightforward elucidation. Instead, they favored dropping crumbs of insight or weaving riddles imperceptible to others.

After figuring this out, Lumian lowered his head and resumed poring over Madam Magician's response.

"Sinners, a secret organization that venerates Inevitability, has been around for more than six years. Its origins can be traced back to the closing stages of the Loen Kingdom, the Feysac Empire, and the Intis Republic's war. Roche Louise Sanson, the name you mentioned, might have been an adherent of Inevitability, though perhaps not granted its corresponding boons. In sum, that war provided evil gods more crevices for invading our world.

"You've likely discerned the close connection between Roche Louise Sanson and your sister Aurore. To a certain extent, they're one, yet not wholly distinct personas. Much like the Rebirth ability, your sister carried a prior background, resurrecting within the departed body of Roche Louise Sanson. According to the normative progression, your sister should've taken such a path:

"Integration of Roche's memories and sentiments→internal conflict→a prelude to dissociative identity disorder→self-harmony→embracing a fresh existence.

"If self-reconciliation fell short, engaging a genuine Psychiatrist was requisite.

"Judging by your sister's behavior during the first five years, even if her self-harmony remained incomplete, she fared reasonably well. Likely, her disquiet was manageable. Yet, she found Roche's association with an evil god unacceptable. This unresolved matter provided an opening for the Soul Summoning Spell.

"Just as you're puzzled, why would she want to use the Soul Summoning Spell on herself? It's a crucial question…

"I suspect that Sinners is not only the secret organization's name, but also a Sequence 2 or Sequence 1 of the Inevitability pathway.

"The entity known as Inevitability does have authority over the past, present, and future. You glimpsed this in your dream, did you not? Sinners of the past and Sufferers of the present, do they not harmonize splendidly? But what befits the future?"

He was relatively calm now. Be it the real Roche Louise Sanson's revival or Aurore's dissociative identity and the vestige of spirit unveiled through the Soul Summoning Spell, he could embrace either without much hardship.

Lumian released a deliberate, slow breath, shifting his gaze towards the letter behind.

"The Armored Shadow problem is very complicated. Neither you nor the Two of Cups should be privy to the specifics at this juncture. In fact, prior to your summoning of such a shadow, I'd only heard of analogous entities from Mr. Hanged Man. He's come across them only three or four times, one instance even within a dream.

“In the future, as you summon the Armored Shadow again and fulfill your commitment, remember to write to me and inform me of any noted changes.”

Mr. Hanged Man… The holder of the Hanged Man card in the Tarot Club? Responsible for addressing the problem with the other world? Lumian’s mind engaged earnestly, realizing Madam Magician’s implicit message: This entails a matter of high caliber. Details are beyond your grasp for now, but you can investigate and follow leads within your capabilities.

This implies the Tarot Club’s vested interest in the world represented by the Armored Shadow… Lumian tacitly nodded, his focus returning to the remnants of the letter.

“I’ll notify you when the timing for the final psychiatric treatment is confirmed…

“Your mystical item should be ready within the upcoming week…

“Meet Hela. No glaring concerns on my end. You might even hint that Aurore’s anomaly might have stemmed from the sale of the Soul Summoning Spell by an April Fool’s member, gauging her reaction. As for telling her about the Armored Shadow, it’s up to you and the Two of Cups.”

Lumian lightly brushed his fingertips, causing the crimson flames to set the letter alight.

After completing this task, he composed a response to Hela.

“Honorable Madame Hela, if it suits you, let’s meet tomorrow at 10 a.m. at Quartier de l’Observatoire’s Little Cow Café on Rue Ancienne.”

Lumian had initially planned to choose a meeting spot in the market district he knew well. But the risk of the Iron and Blood Cross Order spotting him with a stranger was too high.

His second option was to pick a café or beer house near a cathedral. However, he felt that this might come off as overly cautious. It would seem as if he could seek refuge in the cathedral if anything went awry. But the truth was, he didn’t dare to hide there.

In the end, he settled on Rue Ancienne, the street where Salle de Bal Unique was situated.

When the time came, if there was something amiss with Hela, he would draw the danger to the dance hall that set his nerves on edge. He wanted to see if he could manipulate the troublemakers into turning against each other.

After receiving Hela’s response and confirming the time and place, Lumian returned to Rue des Blouses Blanches with the Earth Blood ore. He knocked on Franca and Jenna’s door once more.

Franca was still dressed in her usual attire, not having changed into her nightwear. She looked at Lumian with a puzzled expression and asked, “Why are you here again?”

Instead of answering, Lumian inquired, “Where’s Jenna?”

“Why do you need to know? She received a payment from you and left to visit her brother,” Franca replied, sensing that Lumian had serious matters to discuss.

Only then did Lumian bring up his meeting with Hela the next day. Finally, he posed the question, “Should I mention Armored Shadow?”

“Not yet. We’ll wait until we have a clearer picture,” Franca said after careful consideration. “For now, don’t mention me. Act as if we’ve never met.”

A chuckle escaped Lumian’s lips. “You’re suspicious of everyone.”

Once the details were confirmed, Lumian glanced at Franca. “Are you heading out?”

“Yes, I’m going to Rue des Fontaines to find Gardner,” Franca replied openly, a mischievous grin on her face. “I’m going to introduce him to some real pleasure.”

Lumian was momentarily speechless.

Franca let out a soft laugh.

“I don’t have much of a choice. Since neither you nor Jenna are helping me, I need to find someone else to share in the pleasure.”

Without waiting for Lumian’s response, she added with a smile, “I’ll also tell Gardner that I took part in your operation against your enemy at Jenna’s request, and that I received a substantial share of the spoils.”

Lumian was surprised. “I thought you’d keep it a secret from him.”

Franca chuckled and explained, “That guy is actually a very suspicious person. In most cases, telling him the truth works better than keeping things from him.”

As Lumian nodded in agreement, Franca recalled something.

“The ritualistic incantations have been divined. The dispelling incantation is ‘His Grace,’ and the usage incantations are ‘Cow,’ ‘Sheep,’ and ‘Dog.’ It depends on the type of hide used. Everything’s in Hermes.”

With that, the Demoness waved her hand and left with a joyful demeanor.

The dispelling incantation is ‘His Grace’… The padre sure has a taste for power… Lumian entered Apartment 601, grabbed the five ritualistic hides, and made his way to his safe house.

Of course, he didn’t forget to lock the door for Franca.

…

The following morning, on Rue Ancienne, Quartier de l’Observatoire.

Lumian walked among the vintage buildings, realizing that Salle de Bal Unique and the Alone bar remained closed at this hour.

Ding ding ding. A postman pedaled by in a blue floral coat.

Lumian diverted his gaze from the firmly shut door of Salle de Bal Unique and continued his stroll, heading towards the café named Little Cow.

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Chapter 338 - 338 Hela

338 Hela

Little Cow Café served the working-class folks of the nearby streets, offering them affordable breakfast and lunch options. Even amidst the bustling night market, patrons could enjoy a hearty and satisfying meal for just 1 verl d'or. Many individuals with modest incomes, such as motel attendants, restaurant handymen, and cleaning staff earning between 60 to 80 verl d'or per month, frequented the café either alone or with their families every couple of weeks to treat themselves.

When Lumian finally arrived, the bustling breakfast rush had subsided. The café had only a handful of customers, and the staff seemed somewhat fatigued, lacking any enthusiasm.

After placing an order for a cup of Macael coffee brewed from ground coffee beans, Lumian settled into the designated spot, patiently awaiting Hela's arrival.

As the cuckoo wall clock in the café struck the hour, a woman pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Clad in an intriguing black dress, she emitted an enigmatic allure, reminiscent of the attire one might expect from a widow.

Upon spotting the woman approaching, Lumian straightened up and scrutinized her intently.

Her skin possessed an unnaturally pale complexion, as though she had been shielded from sunlight for an extended period. Light golden hair cascaded naturally over her shoulders, soft yet lacking in luster. Her eyes seemed to absorb all available light, rendering them dark and impervious to revealing their true color. Though her facial features were rather attractive, they didn't leave a distinct impression on Lumian. It was almost as though her cold demeanor had cast a shadow, preventing him from forming a complete assessment.

Her icy demeanor didn't merely create distance; it seemed to emanate from within her, causing the ambient temperature to dip slightly.

Before Lumian could discern more details, the woman seated herself across from him and inquired in a chilly tone, "Muggle's brother?"

Although Lumian had already surmised that this was Madame Hela, her directness caught him slightly off guard.

He hadn't expected her to appear without any attempt at disguise, seemingly unconcerned about potential betrayal.

Lumian didn't use the Niese Face or the Mystery Prying Glasses, but he usually employed basic disguises. Relying on his distinctive golden-black hair and simple makeup, he maintained enough divergence from the Lumian Lee depicted in the wanted posters.

Perhaps this is a form of disguise that I can't detect… Lumian offered a polite smile and nodded. "Madame Hela?"

The lady nodded slightly, acknowledging her identity.

"May I offer you something to drink?" Lumian asked politely.

Hela didn't stand on ceremony.

"A glass of absinthe, and a triple espresso shot."

Drinking liquor at 10 a.m., quite the match for my habits… And she even goes for a triple shot of Reem espresso… Did she have a sleepless night? Or perhaps a night of drinking, seeking absinthe to clear her senses? Lumian lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers, signaling the waiter.

Once the light-green absinthe and the strong Reem espresso arrived in front of Hela, Lumian surveyed his surroundings to ensure a secure environment for their conversation.

Gulp… Hela downed half the glass of absinthe in one swift motion, her pale face gradually regaining some color.

Setting the glass down, she turned a ring on her right middle finger using her left thumb and index finger.

The ring possessed an elegant simplicity, a black diamond with numerous facets set into a base of pure silver.

As Hela rotated the ring gently, Lumian experienced a subtle shift in the surroundings, as if the ambient light had dimmed.

"No one can eavesdrop on us now." Hela's voice retained its chilly demeanor.

Impressive… This mastery goes beyond Franca's abilities. Truly befitting of a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society who has ventured farthest along the paths of the divine… Lumian maintained his gaze on Hela's black eyes that possessed a light-swallowing intensity. He proceeded with calm composure.

"I've made some new discoveries recently."

Hela remained silent, her gaze fixed on Lumian, awaiting further disclosure.

“I’ve caught Guillaume Bénet.” Lumian conveyed this without an air of boastfulness; it was akin to a bartender at Salle de Bal Brise mentioning the concoction of a new cocktail.

Hela’s response was a nod, displaying scant interest in the specifics of Guillaume Bénet’s capture.

Commencing with Guillaume Bénet, Lumian recounted the transformations of Muggle—Aurore—detailing the peculiarities that arose, including the appearance of the lizard-like elf and the name Roche Louise Sanson.

In conclusion, he presented a stack of papers.

“This is the grimoire my sister penned three months prior to the spread of Inevitability’s faith in Cordu. Please review it and ascertain any irregularities.”

Throughout the narrative, Hela remained an attentive listener. Yet, her emotional fluctuations and facial expressions remained limited. Only when Lumian mentioned the second appearance of the lizard-like elf and uttered the name “Roche Louise Sanson,” did she exhibit a slight frown.

Hela, who had maintained silence, swiftly perused the grimoire, her pace almost supernatural, as though she could glean mystical insights from its pages with each flip, detecting any anomalies.

After a span of five to six minutes, she extracted a page from her notebook.

It bore the Soul Summoning Spell that Aurore had documented.

Only members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and those sharing common experiences would detect the issue at a glance… Lumian found himself stirred by a sudden wave of emotion.

Hela raised the absinthe once more, finishing the rest of the dreamy green liquid in a single gulp.

After finishing it, she turned her gaze to Lumian and spoke, “What are your thoughts on the matter of the lizard-like elf?”

“I’ve heard rumors that Heaven has banished a group of elves in recent times. Among them are some who bear resemblance to diaphanous lizards,” Lumian responded. He refrained from delving into the symbolic interpretations that Mr. Poet had provided, instead opting to present the account provided by the official investigator, Ryan.

Hela’s complexion took on a slightly rosier hue, the chill in her demeanor diminishing.

“I possess certain insights into these elves and have conducted a degree of study on them.

“They were not banished from Heaven. It’s plausible that they originated from an alternate realm. Aligning certain folklore and events in the alternate realm, coupled with the passage of time, may have allowed elements from the alternate realm to permeate the spirit world and enter our world.

“At present, this is a hypothesis I personally have. I haven’t substantiated it as yet. I simply wish to convey that I’ve studied the phenomenon of these elves in recent years and have personally encountered the diaphanous lizard-like elves you described. However, they differ from the diaphanous lizard-like beings you’ve mentioned.”

“Not true elves?” Lumian expressed no surprise at this assertion. After all, Ryan and his colleagues had been theorizing, and Mr. Poet’s perspective leaned towards an affiliation with a different faction.

Hela chose not to elaborate, confirming Lumian’s suspicion with a nod.

“I will continue to search for similar motifs in elf legends from various sources.”

Having said that, she spun the grimoire containing the Soul Summoning Spell and pushed it toward Lumian.

“This is likely where your sister’s problem originates.”

Lumian’s eyes conveyed his anticipation for an explanation.

He was genuinely curious to hear Hela’s perspective. However, he didn’t expect her to reveal the most closely guarded secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, as Franca had done.

Hela’s tone remained as cold as ice as she began, “I’ve had numerous interactions with your sister and have discerned that she had been grappling with psychological turmoil rooted in her original family.

“Something is amiss with her biological family. Consequently, your sister had no recourse but to distance herself from them and seek refuge in the border village. It mirrors your gradual realization of Cordu’s growing abnormality, prompting your desire to escape. That’s why I directed your attention to this avenue of investigation.

“And should one employ the Soul Summoning Spell detailed in this notebook upon themselves, it’s highly likely that your sister’s psychological distress will escalate into a mental ailment, potentially leading to true dissociation of her personality.”

Lumian pondered for a moment before inquiring, “Are you suggesting that Roche Louise Sanson is a dissociated persona of my sister? That the foundation of Inevitability’s faith originates from her biological family?”

This deduction, while refraining from disclosing the most guarded secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, seemed to be the most logical conclusion. Yet, Madame Magician had also entertained the notion of dissociative identity disorder as one potential cause.

Hela took a sip of her triple-shot Reem espresso.

“The situation might be more complicated than a case of dissociative identity disorder. There seems to be some bizarre mystical phenomenon involved. That, however, remains contingent upon your future investigations.”

Lumian acknowledged her response with a nod and posed his question with a serious demeanor,

“Is there any issue with the April Fool’s member who sold the Soul Summoning Spell to my sister? Did they foresee a scenario involving dissociative identity disorder?”

Hela remained silent for a few seconds before responding, “It’s suspicious, but I cannot definitively be sure. I intend to probe further, although it might take a considerable duration of time. As you’re aware, the organizational structure of the Research Society is quite informal, and my connections with the individuals from April Fool’s are limited.”

“I understand.” Lumian had heard a similar sentiment from Franca.

Hela glanced at him and pondered for a moment.

“In reality, you are the most suitable candidate to investigate this matter. Unfortunately, you lack the necessary prerequisites.”

“Why do you say that?” Lumian questioned, genuine surprise lacing his words.

For someone known for wit and mischief in Cordu, the prospect of heading the investigation was unexpected. He had assumed that his role would merely entail supporting Franca.

Hela’s tone retained its chilliness.

“If you possessed a Beyonder power to physically alter your appearance, you could transform into Muggle and participate in various Research Society Gatherings as her.

“Then, when the occasion arises, you could observe any April Fool’s member who reacts oddly to Muggle’s presence and displays signs of abnormal behavior. You could even employ yourself as bait to draw out any individual harboring hidden motives.”

Me assuming Aurore and using the code name Muggle to become a member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society? Lumian had never envisioned such a

scenario.

His brow furrowed as he remarked, “Can I really pull off being my sister even with a transformation item? Especially within your Research Society?”

He wasn’t familiar with their world and its intricacies. How could he effectively bridge the communication gap?

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Chapter 339 - 339 Purpose of Visit

339 Purpose of Visit

Hela continued in her cold voice, “Don’t worry, there’s no reason to fret. Our Research Society operates rather informally. Except for a handful of members who maintain close private communication, the rest only convene two to four times a year, all while in disguise.

“And many of the coded terms and expressions we employ for communication are familiar to you. Given your relationship with your sister, she won’t intentionally keep them from you or abstain from using them.”

“Understood.” Lumian’s mood suddenly soured. “She’ll also explain the exact significance to me and attribute it to a philosopher from back home or even Emperor Roselle.”

Upon hearing this, Hela responded, “If you truly possess the potential to masquerade as Muggle and engage with the Research Society members, there’s no need to forcibly cite philosophers from back home. Simply allude to the latter portion of the content.”

“Then, should I incorporate ‘Emperor Roselle once said’?” Lumian deliberated the specifics earnestly.

He lacked a key item and couldn’t authentically impersonate Aurore. And even though the Niese Face was primarily an illusion, it could be instantly deciphered by Beyonders equipped with the corresponding abilities—whether the other party held a rank as low as Sequence 9 Mystery Pryer, they’d discern his non-female identity at a glance. Yet, he remained determined to give his utmost. Who knew if a chance for Transfiguration with diminished negative effects would arise in the future?

Regarding mystic makeup achieved through the use of the Mystery Prying Glasses, it wouldn’t provide psychological suggestions, given that attendees concealed their faces at the gathering. Furthermore, it couldn’t alter his gender.

Hela lapsed into silence, her facial muscles twitching subtly.

“In the event that you’re presented with an opportunity to enact such a role, make sure to avoid these mentions. You might not possess precise discernment about when such references are suitable.

“Just keep in mind, other members frequently employ the phrase ‘Emperor Roselle once said’ to liven the mood or offer amusement.”

Why does it feel like Emperor Roselle's image in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society isn't too favorable… It's not that it's unfavorable. Instead, it assumes a comedic quality… Speaking of which, Aurore appears to do the same. Whenever her spirits dip, as long as I deliberately reference Emperor Roselle's words, she tends to loosen up and finds herself chuckling involuntarily… Lumian struggled to fully grasp the rationale of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, but he refrained from further probing, recognizing the necessity to feign ignorance concerning their most profound secret.

If the opportunity arose, he intended to seek Franca's insights on the matter.

Hela continued, "While participating in the gathering, keep in mind to listen more than you speak. If you lack confidence, avoid delving into profound discussions. Should others delve into the past, if possible, shift the focus and maintain a patronizing tone. Emulating Muggle's traits and characteristics will aid in effectively acting as her."

Lumian pondered for a moment.

"This guise, however, remains merely a surface-level ruse. Your Research Society houses Beyonders adept in divination and possessing keen intuition. They could readily discern that I'm not my sister."

"No, quite the contrary. They might prove you to be the genuine Muggle," Hela furnished an unforeseen response to Lumian's expectation.

In the midst of his unveiled astonishment, Hela expounded, "To begin with, most of us remain unaware of the realities of our fellow members, impeding our capacity for efficacious divination or prophecy.

"Additionally, with my understanding of your sister, I employed an artifact to divine her state. Yet, I couldn't ascertain her life or death status. It was akin to confronting a formidable anti-divination barrier."

Wh— Lumian was caught off guard before grasping the underlying rationale.

As per Madam Magician, Aurore hadn't entirely died. A possibility of revival persisted, her soul shard sealed by Mr. Fool, thereby rendering conventional divination unable to circumvent the seal and ascertain Aurore's genuine condition. A potent anti-divination effect was at play.

Hela took another sip of her triple shot Reem espresso.

What? Lumian nearly blurted out the question.

"Perhaps this stems from the fact that a fragment of my sister's soul has been specially preserved within me."

Lumian let out a long sigh.

“What a pity…”

Post Hela’s analysis, he harbored the conviction that he could seamlessly stand in for his sister within the folds of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society without incurring exposure.

He yearned to do so. This way, he could not only aid Franca in her operation but also safeguard her from solitary risks. Together, they could operate—one in plain sight, the other in the shadows—ensnaring their adversary in a carefully orchestrated trap.

Simultaneously, Lumian recognized the potential of utilizing the society’s gatherings to gather invaluable information about Aurore.

Regrettably, his one hindrance was his lack of Transfiguration abilities. The power to alter his gender, stature, or physique eluded him.

A brief silence hung in the air before Hela reiterated her commitment to investigating the April Fool’s predicament.

Following that, she spoke candidly, “I’ve come to Trier this time to delve deeper past the catacombs. Do you have any information about that place?”

Deeper into the catacombs? Lumian’s heart skipped a beat as he took the initiative to remind her, “It’s very dangerous there.”

Madame Hela’s guidance from her letters and prior suggestion had been invaluable. With deep appreciation, he recounted his grasp of the catacombs and the bizarre phenomena he had borne witness to. Finally, he said, “For some inexplicable reason, I alone retain memories of the ill-fated couple. The rest feign ignorance, as though they never existed. True, Kendall, the administrator of the tomb, ought to have sensed it as well, yet he feigned ignorance.”

Hela listened in quiet contemplation. Without astonishment or consternation, she inquired, “Have you heard of the Samaritan Women’s Spring?”

“I have, though from the mouth of a charlatan…” Lumian mused, his brow furrowing as he tried to recall Osta Trul’s narrative. “He claimed that the Samaritan Women’s Spring on the upper level of the catacombs is a sham. Just a puddle left behind due to a construction error back then. The administrators spun it into a legend. But deep in the underground world, within an ancient tomb, there lies the real Fountain of Oblivion.”

Hela refrained from commenting on Lumian’s account and simply nodded.

“Thank you.”

With her gratitude expressed, she downed the last of her three-shot espresso, rose from her seat, and made her way toward the café’s exit.

As she rose from her seat, the heavy silence was shattered, and the sunlight once again flooded the area with its radiance.

Lumian remained seated a while longer, savoring the last sips of his Macael coffee. Afterwards, he strode along Rue Ancienne, his destination being Place du Purgatoire. There, he planned to catch a public carriage back to the market district.

Passing by Salle de Bal Unique and the Alone bar, a sudden, crystalline tinkle reached Lumian's ears.

His heart skipped a beat, and he swiftly turned around. He saw a figure he knew well, who had just entered the newly opened Alone bar.

Draped in a delicate, pale-white fishnet dress, the figure sported a small, circular hat adorned with silk flowers. Two dainty silver bells dangled from the intricate hair buns, complementing the similar accessories on the figure's dark-hued boots.

Leah… Bureau 8's Leah… Lumian recognized the person as Leah, the official investigator who had entered his dream.

Salle de Bal Unique is perilous. Could the Alone bar be used by Bureau 8 to monitor the opposing stronghold? After retracting his gaze, Lumian continued forward as if nothing had happened.

…

Returning to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian found himself summoned to 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative by Gardner Martin, just when he was hoping for some rest.

Inside a room adorned with bookshelves, Gardner Martin, donned in a light-colored shirt and dark trousers, greeted him with an energetic smile.

"Franca mentioned that your vengeance is complete?"

Lumian detected an odd thrill emanating from the Boss, as if he had indulged in immense pleasure and hadn't fully calmed down.

He responded candidly, "Yes, I've already killed Guillaume Bénet. Thankfully, Red Boots, Jenna, and Anthony Reid, the information broker I hired, assisted me."

He spared no details about the participants—there was no use concealing anything. They relied on "Rat" Christo and his pets to communicate, after all.

Gardner Martin nodded slightly and commented, "You've exceeded my expectations in terms of efficiency. Franca didn't delve into the specifics. Can you give me an overview of the overall situation?"

Lumian held nothing back when it came to the Sinners organization. He elucidated Guillaume Bénet's various abilities, detailing their specific impacts.

Gardner Martin listened intently and asked in thought, “What do you reckon is Guillaume Bénet’s strength equivalent to in Sequence?”

Lumian replied without hesitation, “Sequence 5.”

A brief pause ensued as Gardner Martin fell into contemplative silence before he uttered, “I’ve summoned you for a purpose, a mission.”

“What mission?” Lumian didn’t hide his curiosity.

Gardner Martin’s smile reappeared.

“It’s quite straightforward. Make your way to the Mechanical Café in Quartier de l’Opéra and establish contact with a literary and arts group named ‘Black Cat.’”

“I lack any artistic inclination,” Lumian honestly admitted.

Gardner Martin smiled and said, “No artistic inclination is necessary. Your primary role will involve sponsoring and befriending one of the members of Black Cat.

“His ancestor boasted an aristocratic title of a count, a fact he’s quite fond of calling himself that.

“Right, his name is Poufer Sauron.”

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Chapter 340 - 340 Black Cat

340 Black Cat

Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra, Rue Lombar.

The street was famous for its array of sweets, and colorful candies adorned every corner.

At the end of Rue Lombar stood the Mechanical Café, nestled next to a small confectionery factory.

From the outside, it looked like an ordinary place, and even peering through the glass windows, there was no hint of its mechanical nature. The black Triangular Sacred Emblem on the weighty wooden door was the only reminder of its true identity.

Lumian pushed the dark-brown door, but it resisted as if locked from within.

After a moment's observation, he pulled the doorbell hanging by the secondary window.

Amidst the tinkling chimes, Lumian caught the soft clink of metal and watched as the door inched open.

A mechanical arm extended from its rear, reaching all the way to the bar counter like an ornamental display.

Surveying the surroundings, Lumian made his way to a corner of the café. Two single-legged tables were placed there, hosting five individuals.

Among them, a middle-aged man with fiery red hair stood out. Fair-skinned from cosmetics, with dark circles accentuating his brownish-red eyes, he was a captivating figure.

Clean-shaven, he sported an open brown velvet coat and a red shirt sans bow tie, exuding an air of refinement and casual elegance.

This was "Count" Poufer, the member of Intis's former royal Sauron family whom Lumian sought.

Having inherited a substantial fortune from his father, he hadn't ventured into politics, military service, or trade. Instead, he moved within various artistic circles as a literary critic and frequented "Black Cat" gatherings.

Approaching with a smile, Lumian inquired, “Are you Count Poufer?”

Poufer Sauron looked up casually, his tone relaxed as he asked, “Are you the friend Martin mentioned?”

“Yes, Ciel Dubois.” Lumian responded without any reservation, claiming a seat by pulling up a chair.

Poufer gave him a measured once-over, a satisfied smile playing on his lips.

“Not bad at all; you’re quite the beautiful friend.”

“Among literature, oil paintings, sculptures, poetry, and music, what’s your preference?”

“Novels,” Lumian replied without hesitation.

Poufer leaned back, gesturing towards the plump middle-aged man diagonally across from him.

“Anori, the author with the most literary eloquence in recent times.”

The author who delved into the realm of erotica, forgetting that the essence of writing is to explore human nature? Lumian naturally recollected Aurore’s assessment of this novelist.

Initially, Anori’s works had explored love as a means to understand humanity. But over time, the focus shifted, consumed by the former. Aurore believed that if not for restrictions, Anori might have penned something akin to ‘Monks Chasing Dogs’—a risqué novel.

Of course, Lumian cared little for probing human nature; he simply enjoyed the engaging parts.

“Your novels have certainly broadened my horizons,” he said to Anori genuinely.

With black hair and blue eyes, Arnaud puffed on his pipe and remarked, “Luckily, you didn’t mention appreciating my ‘Death of a Herald.’”

Death of a Herald… Isn’t that Adri’s work? Right, Aurore had mentioned the similarity in names, leading to frequent confusion. Enlightenment dawned as Lumian inquired, “You mean the Adri who’s backed by the government, earning a five-figure fortune yearly, yet only manages to produce dogsh*t?”

Anori erupted in laughter.

“That’s worth a glass of absinthe!”

With that, he tapped the silver-gray metal button on the single-legged table before him, thrice.

Count Poufer took pleasure in Lumian's reception and proceeded to introduce the other members of the Black Cat organization.

Among them were Mullen, a painter with a pale and weary complexion, Ernst Young, a slightly stern-looking literary critic, and Iraeta, a poet who held a cherrywood pipe.

Just as Lumian was wrapping up his greetings, he witnessed the iron-colored surface of Anori's one-legged table split open unexpectedly, unfolding like a blossoming flower.

Within the "stamen," a glass of emerald absinthe, radiating a dreamlike sheen, appeared on a tray that ascended through a mechanical lift.

Author Anori picked up the glass of absinthe and tossed a silver coin worth 1 verl d'or onto the tray.

Gradually, the mechanical elevator descended, causing the parted metal surface to seal shut, restoring the one-legged table to its original state.

Anori slid the absinthe toward Lumian, a smile gracing his features.

"Cheers to what you just said!"

It's really a Mechanical Café… Lumian reacquainted himself with this place.

His gaze drifted to the table's broad and sturdy leg, suspecting it to be hollow and linked to an underground conduit.

Taking a sip of the absinthe and savoring its familiar bitterness, Lumian directed his attention to the one-legged table.

"No change?"

"Here, a glass of absinthe costs 1 verl d'or," Anori responded with a grin.

Isn't that rather steep? Salle de Bal Brise and the basement bar only charge seven licks. Their quality is nearly identical… Lumian critiqued inwardly.

1 verl d'or was equivalent to 20 licks.

At that instant, Mullen, the pale-faced painter who seemed perpetually fatigued but was a handsome man, took a sip of his coffee and shared, "I heard that an elephant has arrived at Trier Zoo. Quite an uncommon sight."

The pudgy Anori muttered, "What's so intriguing about an elephant? It strikes me as utterly mundane."

Count Poufer let out a soft chuckle.

“Shall we then discuss the ongoing clash between the parliament and the two Churches, the high-ranking government officials perpetually stumbling, the detestable censorship of publications, and the covert agents shadowing us like hyenas?”

Anori sighed in resignation.

“Let’s just stick to that elephant.”

Amidst the laughter of the Black Cat members, Count Poufer crossed his right leg and proposed, “Since we have a new friend, how about engaging in a game of mysticism?”

A game involving mysticism? Lumian’s eyebrows twitched.

“What sort of game?” inquired Iraeta, the poet, puffing contemplatively on his pipe.

Count Poufer smiled and said, “A game known as King’s Pie.”

Observing the perplexed expressions around the table, Count Poufer chuckled and continued, “Don’t any of you have a childhood or a family? Haven’t you played this game?

“The rule is to divide the King’s Pie into portions equal to the number of participants plus 1. The larger piece is ritually dedicated to a deity or esteemed ancestor we hold in reverence. Among the remaining portions, one contains a broad bean or coin, hidden. Whoever discovers it becomes the ‘king’ for the day, empowered to issue commands to the others. Naturally, these commands must remain within the bounds of reason.”

The mysticism aspect involves offering up the excess King’s Pie in sacrifice? Lumian cast a glance at Anori, Mullen, and the rest, intrigued by the idea and curious whether any Beyonders were part of the group.

Of course, none of them appeared to be.

In just over ten seconds, Count Poufer’s proposal garnered agreement from everyone except Lumian.

He commenced by pressing the corresponding button on his one-legged table, hitting it the appropriate number of times to signal the kitchen to dispatch a King’s Pie.

Reportedly, this dessert had been a favorite since the era of the Sauron Dynasty.

…

In the underground of église Saint-Robert, within the confines of the Inquisition, a gathering of Purifiers was underway. Valentine, Imre, and their fellow Purifiers

congregated in the office of Deacon Angoulême.

Dressed in a light-gold shirt and pale-white pants, Angoulême raised the dossier in his hand and addressed the group, “We’ve verified the body found at 50 Rue Vincent in Quartier de la Princesse Rouge to be that of Guillaume Bénet, the former wanted padre. Ensure that the police headquarters takes down the wanted posters from the market district.”

The market district case wasn’t under the Purifiers’ jurisdiction, but Valentine had heard about it. Finally, there was confirmation.

Sporting a formal blue coat, Valentine glanced at Angoulême and asked, “Deacon, have there been any developments in the investigation into Guillaume Bénet’s killer?”

“At the moment, no suspects,” responded Angoulême, his golden hair, eyebrows, and beard lending him an imposing aura. He continued, “What we can ascertain is that there were clear signs of incineration at the scene, and it’s likely that Guillaume Bénet succumbed to a Demoness’s curse.”

“At least a Sequence 7 Hunter and a Demoness? That’s an uncommon combination,” Imre remarked, clearly taken aback.

To his knowledge, most who followed the Demoness pathway were affiliated with the Demoness family, a formidable secret organization that seldom required collaboration.

“Uncommon doesn’t mean impossible,” retorted Angoulême.

As a Purifier deacon, he had access to more confidential information and experience compared to Imre, Valentine, and the others. He had even personally executed two members of the Demoness family.

Valentine furrowed his brow, ruminating for a moment before suggesting, “Could Lumian Lee be involved? He does have a solid motive.”

“But he lacks the power,” Imre objected. “How could he advance to Pyromaniac so quickly after leaving Cordu? Isn’t he concerned about losing control? Furthermore, based on your description, not even a Pyromaniac would be a match for Guillaume Bénet.”

Valentine clung to his conjecture.

“That’s why he might have sought help from a Demoness.

“Could he have joined the Demoness family to seek revenge and then transition into becoming a Demoness himself?

“If that’s true, this could become a major issue. Lumian Lee carries significant problems with him. And you mentioned the Demoness family’s penchant for sowing chaos.”

Angoulême nodded. “We must keep a close eye on this. I’ll report this matter. Meanwhile, intensify the scrutiny of suspicious individuals in the market district.”

Having made up his mind, he reassured Valentine, “Don’t be overly anxious. Lumian Lee isn’t the only one with a reason to eliminate Guillaume Bénet. There are powerful bounty hunters, official members of the Aurora Order, and the bestowed of other evil gods.”

Valentine acknowledged concisely, signifying his comprehension.

Following their discussion on recent Beyonder cases, Valentine and Imre exited the deacon’s office, passing by Charlie who was acquainting himself with a mechanical typewriter, before heading towards the tunnel leading to église Saint-Robert.

“Why do you think the quasi-Demoness is seeking us? Has she uncovered crucial information?” Imre inquired curiously, conversing with his fellow teammate.

Valentine ruminated briefly before responding, “Could it be related to Guillaume Bénet’s death?”

Imre was caught off guard.

“Are you suggesting she had contact with the Demoness family?”

Before Valentine could reply, Imre shook his head.

“That’s impossible. The Demoness family despises female Assassins. If they encounter one, they’ll surely eliminate them.”

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Chapter 341 - 341 Branch

341 Branch

On Rue Doyle, nestled between the market district and the solemn Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, stretched a verdant street. Its clean pavements and modern architectural style set it apart from its surroundings. Jenna had deliberately chosen this location to rendezvous with the Purifiers. The individuals frequenting this place had little connection to her former life, and the likelihood of recognition was slim.

Nevertheless, her overall presentation remained faithful to a certain style: a portrayal of cleanliness, radiance, and vitality. This image was a composite distilled from the bishop's sermons and the impassioned advocacy she had encountered during her involvement in Church activities.

A Sun Talisman dangled around her neck, accentuating her brownish-yellow hair that was neatly tied up. She followed the elongated shadows cast by the trees, moving toward Apartment 17.

In the midst of her journey, a brown four-wheeled carriage rumbled by. The window was ajar, revealing an arresting visage.

Adorned in a black court dress, a lady graced the carriage's interior. A dark veil hat adorned with white feathers crowned her head, intricately framing her raven-black hair. Her face boasted soft contours; her chin held a graceful curve. A slender, elevated nose bridge led to plump, subtly upturned crimson lips. Within her dark gray eyes, a glint of brightness coexisted with a hint of melancholy, evoking a pang of sympathy.

How beautiful… Jenna sighed from the bottom of her heart as the carriage passed.

Even though Jenna herself could be considered attractive, she remained capable of appreciating the allure of others. Simultaneously, she acknowledged the stark contrast between her appearance and that of Franca, who had ascended to the rank of Demoness of Pleasure, as well as the lady who had just passed.

Shifting her focus, Jenna ascended to the roof of Apartment 17 on Rue Doyle.

Her wait was brief, for Imre and Valentine soon appeared.

Valentine's demeanor, though frosty, gave way to a proactive inquiry. "Have you obtained crucial intelligence?"

Valentine's gaze swept past Jenna's neck, where the Sun Sacred Emblem was suspended. A subtle nod confirmed his satisfaction.

Jenna shook her head slowly. "No."

Without permitting Imre and Valentine to voice their queries, she bared her emotions in earnest. "I want to repent."

Repent? Imre exchanged a quizzical glance with Valentine.

Had something gone awry?

Jenna's gaze lowered, a bittersweet smile touching her lips as she regarded the ground.

"My mother haunts my dreams, recurring persistently.

"And each time she appears in my sleep, I find myself grappling with a nagging question: Why did the Church permit someone like Hugues Artois to partake in the elections? Upon uncovering the truth, why did they not promptly apprehend his accomplices and thus forestall the ensuing catastrophe?

"I-I yearn for redemption. The pain gnaws at my heart, sowing doubt in my faith, and causing me to question whether God and the Church still watch over us."

These sentiments were sincere, albeit less intense than they seemed.

Valentine felt ashamed and didn't know how to respond to Jenna.

"Likewise, the Church isn't all-powerful. In Intis, we remain subject to the constraints imposed by the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery, the National Convention, and the government. Our actions are bound by limitations; we cannot operate without restraint and probe at will.

Jenna fell into contemplative silence for a few seconds before exhaling, a slow release of tension. She extended her arms slightly, proclaiming, "Praise the Sun!"

"Praise the Sun!" both Valentine and Imre echoed in unison.

With her sincere performance, Jenna asked, "Who propelled Hugues Artois to the position of parliament member? And who facilitated his representation for an evil god?"

"We're in the midst of investigating. No substantial breakthroughs have emerged thus far," Imre replied after measured consideration.

Jenna's expression turned to one of anxiety and concern.

"Why the lack of substantive progress? Is it due to the limitations mentioned earlier, which hinder the acquisition of pivotal leads? Do you require my help? I

operate unbound by restrictions and hold no fear of breaching the law!"

Imre and Valentine weren't caught off guard by Jenna's reaction. It echoed the same spirit as her abrupt assassination of Hugues Artois, albeit in a more subdued form.

The two exchanged glances, a wordless deliberation on whether to entrust this matter to an informant bound by contract, thereby affording greater flexibility and latitude.

Drawing upon Franca's counsel, Jenna refrained from invoking Instigation directly. She instead gauged the disposition of the two Purifiers and employed words to accomplish her intent.

"If the Church itself finds its hands tied, could it not delegate the task to capable devotees?

"Which holds greater importance—the Church's dignity or the well-being of God's children?

"With each thwarted catastrophe, numerous families and lives are spared. They all stand as devout supplicants to the Sun.

"An evil god was backing Hugues Artois!"

Valentine found himself swayed, and observing Imre's absence of dissent, he addressed Jenna with gravity, "Are you sure you want to help us investigate this matter? It's very dangerous. The odds of forfeiting your life are substantial."

Jenna responded with a smile suffused with complexity, "I'm afraid of death, but I'm more afraid of becoming a sacrificial lamb for the heretics, much like my mother."

She didn't hide her hatred at all.

Imre then said, "In the course of our investigations, we've ascertained that Hugues Artois shared close ties with General Philip. Certain covert activities trace back to him. However, General Philip succumbed to illness last year, resulting in the loss of all leads.

"The other backers and supporters of Hugues Artois either owed their allegiance to General Philip or deemed him an asset worthy of support. Their involvement in heretical belief or secret organizations remains unverified."

Jenna blurted out, "What about Philip's family? What of the heretics who encircled Hugues Artois?"

"There's nothing wrong with Philip's family," Valentine responded, his tone revealing traces of vexation. "We've apprehended only two heretics affiliated with Hugues Artois's campaign. Their roles were comparatively inconsequential. The individual most knowledgeable opted for suicide when escape became unfeasible.

His fanaticism stymied our quest for the sought-after leads. We've effectively eliminated two branches of the secret organization, the Order of All Extinction."

Order of All Extinction… Jenna recalled the secret organization that believed in an evil god.

Imre supplemented, "The primary source of knowledge is the red-haired woman named Cassandra. She hails from the Sauron lineage, a collateral branch of the former royal family. A Beyonder and a heretic graced with a boon."

Imre shook his head.

"At present, no concrete conclusions exist. The noble families that supported Hugues Artois maintain standard relations with the Sauron family. Cassandra chose an adventuring life, as she encountered minimal regard within the Sauron family hierarchy. Subsequently, she became a Beyonder, ultimately joining Hugues Artois's team last year."

…

Quartier de la Maison d'Opéra, Rue Lombar, Mechanical Café.

Mechanical precision guided the King's Pie to Poufer Sauron and his associates within the Black Cat organization. The pie bore the appearance of a brown floral marvel adorned with intricate black motifs.

Poufer looked around and said to Lumian, Anori, and the others, "I suggest that this game of King's Pie serves as a tribute to one of my esteemed forebears. He held the title of the first Count Ardennen and the twenty-seventh Count of Champagne."

In his interactions, Poufer habitually designated himself as Count Ardennen.

"The Count of Champagne, the one who coveted Roselle's ass?" Novelist Anori quipped with a grin.

Over the past year, the most sought-after banned manuscript within Trier's covert book market had been "Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles." Within its pages lay a trove of Emperor Roselle-related rumors, intermingled with an array of outlandish, sizzling revelations.

Poufer sighed and said, "That would be the thirtieth Count of Champagne, the great-grandson of my illustrious ancestor. He hails from a distinct Sauron family branch."

"I have no objections." The flaxen-haired painter, Mullen, steered the conversation back on track.

This was merely a game—no one else insisted on allocating the surplus King's Pie to a specific figure, thus prompt consensus was achieved.

Considering Lumian's usual style, he should have objected and angered Count Poufer. However, he recalled that his current role revolved around that of a friend of Gardner Martin, scion of a prosperous merchant family with a penchant for art. He was essentially playing the role of a spendthrift imbecile, a persona that basked in the lavish spending only to incur disdain.

Poufer shifted his attention to the more reticent literary critic, Ernst Young, and instructed, "You shall have the honor of cutting the pie."

Ernst Young, his black curls framing his face, indulged in a self-deprecating smile.

"I despise the absence of waiters in the Mechanical Café. It makes me feel like a waiter."

"Isn't that a good thing? It signifies the absence of spies," Novelist Anori muttered.

A puff of cherrywood smoke escaped the pipe held by Iraeta, the poet, as he chuckled in response, "Perhaps the spy is among us."

At that moment, Ernst Young had already picked up the table knife, slicing the King's Pie into seven equal portions.

Poufer delicately positioned one of the King's Pie slices near the plate's rim, hands clasped, cradling it against his chest. His voice, a soft cadence, invoked an invocation, "To you, member of the mighty Sauron family, the great Vermonda Champagne Sauron."

Poufer repeated the incantation thrice. Lumian couldn't help but note that Mechanical Café, already bereft of its waiters, descended into an amplified hush, akin to the commencement of the bishops' sermons.

After offering the excess portion of the King's Pie to Vermonda Sauron, Poufer raised his gaze to Lumian and grinned.

"You're the guest. You'll be the first to choose."

Without observing, Lumian extended his hand to the King's Pie closest to him.

At that moment, Termiboros's resonant voice echoed in Lumian's ears: "Switch."

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Chapter 342 - 342 Fright?

342 Fright?

Switch? Lumian hadn't anticipated that Termiboros would drop a hint at a moment like this.

Whether this Inevitability angel aimed to use the opportunity to set a trap or had some other intention, or if He simply sought to avert any trouble from befalling His vessel at this particular time and place, it was clear that this seemingly unremarkable game of King's Pie concealed profound hidden hazards. Once triggered, it would plunge all those present into a perilous abyss.

When Count Poufer brought up the mystical aspect, the act of sacrificing a piece of King's Pie to a deity or revered ancestor, Lumian suspected the presence of a Beyonder element. It resembled the divination games favored by many enthusiasts of mysticism. To his astonishment, the issue proved even graver than he had initially imagined. It had prompted an angel to believe that he—Lumian, a dual Sequence 7—was incapable of handling it or could be harmed by it.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Lumian struggled to fathom Termiboros's motives. All he could manage was cautiously extending his arm and nonchalantly selecting one of the remaining five slices of King's Pie.

This time, Termiboros didn't intervene.

After Lumian, Anori, Mullen, Ernst Young, and Iraeta each acquired a slice of King's Pie, only the one nearest to Lumian remained.

"Seems like it's mine." Count Poufer leaned in, grinned, and seized the slice of King's Pie. He brought it to his mouth and delicately took a bite.

Lumian followed suit. The crust was crisp, the filling sweet, its aroma lingering on his palate. The quality was rather impressive.

After a few bites, Count Poufer chuckled and remarked, "Looks like I'm the king today."

As he uttered the words, he extracted a broad bean from his mouth.

The instant Lumian laid eyes on the broad bean, a faint trace of blood and rust wafted to his senses.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in the Mechanical Café grew heavy, as if everyone dreaded receiving an order they couldn't bear.

Count Poufer rose from his seat, his back to the window that faced the street, blotting out the sunlight, which cast a faint shadow over his face. His smile seemed somewhat dark.

Count Poufer's gaze fixed upon the novelist Anori, a mischievous smile dancing on his lips.

"Step outside the café and declare to the passersby, 'I'm dog sh*t.'"

Anori, who had been on edge, let out a sigh of relief and responded with a grin, "Sure thing."

The portly man rose from his seat and hastened to the door, grasping the handle nestled in the side wall.

Amidst a grinding noise and faint clatters, the mechanical arm suddenly tightened, its grip "dragging" the weighty wooden door ajar.

Anori ventured outside and onto the street. He directed his voice at the pedestrians, "I'm dogsh*t!

"I'm a piece of dogsh*t raised by a sow!

"My whole family is dogsh*t raised by sows!"

The passersby stared in astonishment before erupting into laughter.

After cursing himself, Anori returned to Lumian and the others in high spirits.

"You've got an impressive mental fortitude." Lumian compelled himself to rephrase "you're really thick-skinned" in a more polished manner.

Novelist Anori chuckled and said, "Whenever I'm stuck in my writing, I'll curse myself out on the balcony. It's the simplest method."

"You writers do have your peculiarities." Lumian was reminded of his sister, who fancied herself afflicted by an advanced stage of procrastination syndrome.

Anori took a sip of absinthe and resettled himself. His attention turned to Count Poufer, who, with his back to the light, cast his gaze upon Mullen, the pale and handsome painter.

"Slap Iraeta."

Mullen relaxed in his seat, opting not to rise. He leaned forward and delivered a slap to Poet Iraeta.

Iraeta, his hair thinning and his facial muscles slightly sagging, remained unperturbed. He merely drew another puff from his pipe.

Noticing Lumian's scrutiny, he offered a casual smile.

"As a poet, I must learn to relish the malice around me."

Finding joy in malice… What a poetic youth. Well, more accurately, a poetic middle-aged man… Lumian surveyed the participants of the game, realizing that aside from Count Poufer, who had consumed the broad bean, nothing else appeared amiss.

Count Poufer shifted his posture slightly, his features still shaded by the backlight.

He said to Ernst Young, "Express your loyalty to me."

When the Black Cats convened, they often engaged in a variety of audacious acts. In a more contemporary characterization, they were avant-gardes of performance art. Hence, Ernst Young felt no qualms about kneeling on one knee and professing loyalty. He even considered it insufficient, sensing that it lacked excitement or humiliation.

Count Poufer then turned to the poet, Iraeta, and dictated, "Give all your money to the beggar across the street."

Iraeta was taken aback. His heart ached as he responded, "Alright.

"As you know, I'm a pauper. Over the past five years, I've scarcely earned 3,000 verl d'or from my poetry. Each day, I ponder which friend might organize an event and offer me a free drink."

Quite the honest poet… Lumian pondered whether he should sponsor this individual and witness what kind of verses he could produce. After all, the "sponsorship fee" was supplied by Gardner Martin. Not employing it would result in it going unused. Conversely, by sponsoring certain artists, he could potentially pocket a portion for himself.

Before Count Poufer could reply, Iraeta suddenly burst into laughter. He fumbled in his pocket and exclaimed with excitement, "That's why I only brought 5 verl d'or!"

"5 verl d'or? At the Vichy Café, that'd barely cover half a bottle of mineral water and two boiled eggs," Novelist Anori murmured as he watched Poet Iraeta hastily depart. He tossed the 5 verl d'or to the beggar opposite.

Vichy Café resided in an alley off Avenue du Boulevard. It drew parliament members, high-ranking government officials, bankers, industrialists, financiers, famed courtesans, and esteemed authors, painters, poets, and sculptors from the upper echelons of society.

By this juncture, every participant had taken their turn, leaving Lumian as the last.

Count Poufer fixed his gaze on Lumian, his look profound as he spoke, “This is your inaugural time attending our Black Cat gathering. I’ll assign you a simple task. Take your slice of King’s Pie and proceed to the last room in the café’s basement. Exchange the pie for a sheet of white paper.”

This bears a hint of mystique… If anything goes awry, I’ll just burn down that basement… Lumian mumbled to himself as he clutched the partially-eaten King’s Pie. As per Novelist Anori’s guidance, he located a staircase leading to the basement close to the kitchen.

Before venturing forth, he ignited the gas wall lamps in the vicinity. Under their faint yellow radiance, he navigated a corridor cluttered with various items until he reached the last room.

The vermilion door stood tightly sealed. Lumian listened attentively but detected no movements from within.

There were no suspicious signs around the door either.

Lumian extended his right palm, gripped the handle, gave it a gentle twist, and gradually pushed inward.

As the gas lamps in the basement’s corridor illuminated the space, objects came into view.

These objects were heads, clustered within the dusky shadows, their gazes devoid of emotion, fixed on the “intruder” at the entrance.

Lumian’s pupils dilated as he recognized a few familiar heads.

They belonged to Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, Critic Ernst Young, and Poet Iraeta!

Just before conjuring a fireball, Lumian, experienced and resilient, forced himself to steady his nerves and discern the situation.

The heads lacked the pallor of the deceased, and the room was bereft of the distinct scent of preservatives.

Lumian reined in his initial reaction and scrutinized the scene. He realized that these were wax heads that had been taken down.

Resembling melons, they were stashed within compartments on a wooden frame.

Is this mission intended to startle me? Were it not for Termiboros’s forewarning, how could such a prank perturb me? What’s so mystical about this? Lumian ruminated for a moment before placing his King’s Pie on a wooden shelf and extracting a sheet of white paper from one of the wax heads.

Upon returning to the Mechanical Café with the white paper in hand, he was met with smiles from Anori, Iraeta, and the others, as though gauging any lingering trepidation.

Count Poufer nodded in satisfaction.

“You executed the mission admirably.”

What if I hadn’t executed it admirably? What would have transpired? Lumian simulated residual unease and inquired,

“Those wax heads seemed so lifelike that they nearly stopped my heart!”

“Haha,” Anori chortled. “This serves as Count’s welcome gesture to every newcomer. He’s rather fond of collecting wax figurine heads. Each individual he acknowledges receives an invitation from a wax sculptor to immortalize their heads as art and place them in the basement of the Mechanical Café.”

It’s almost as if your heads have been given to Count Poufer… Lumian eyed Anori and the others’ necks, yet found no trace of sutures.

After delving into various rumors circulating within the novelists’ circle and offering 2,000 verl d’or to sponsor the Black Cat, Lumian took his leave.

As he departed, his gaze inadvertently swept over the two-legged tables.

Abruptly, Lumian’s pupils constricted.

He observed that Count Poufer, Anori, and the others still had unfinished King’s Pie on their plates, while the white-glazed porcelain plate that had previously held the pie now sat empty.

There should have been a slice of King’s Pie intended for the Sauron family ancestor!

It was gone!

Lumian’s perplexity couldn’t be concealed. He gestured toward the snack plate and remarked,

“I recall there being a slice of King’s Pie left.”

Count Poufer chuckled and sipped his coffee.

“I ate it.”

“Is that so…” Lumian smiled in realization.

Turning away, he exited the Mechanical Café, the smile on his face gradually waning.

Count Poufer had only taken two bites of his slice of King's Pie!

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Chapter 343 - 343 Feedback

343 Feedback

As Lumian strode down Rue Lombar toward the nearest public carriage stop, a sense of unease settled over him. Observing the deserted street, he dropped his voice to a hushed tone as he muttered, “Temiboros, why did you make me choose the King’s Pie slice without the broad bean?”

What if he had consumed that fateful broad bean and ascended to the role of the “king”?

But Termiboros remained silent, withholding any response.

Lumian pondered for a moment, then rephrased his question.

“Though the entire incident held a few unsettling details, the outcome appeared unremarkable. It’s hard to discern whether it’s tied to mysticism or Beyonder powers.”

After a brief pause, Termiboros’s deep voice echoed in Lumian’s ears.

“Next time, you could consider defying the king’s orders.”

What if I chose to disregard the king’s commands? What if I indulged in my King’s Pie instead of placing it in the room of wax figurines or even walking away with the paper? Lumian’s mind plunged into contemplation.

Rather than heading directly back to the market district, he hailed a public carriage bound for Rue Scheer on Avenue du Boulevard.

As an official member of the Aurora Order, he bore the responsibility of promptly reporting his execution of Guillaume Bénet and the latest developments within the Iron and Blood Cross Order to Mr. K. Simultaneously, he hoped to fleece something out of them.

Participating in three secret organizations came with the potential of receiving triple rewards, but it also entailed making three reports per mission.

19 Rue Scheer, underground of Psychic’s headquarters.

Mr. K, perpetually unchanging, sat in the red armchair, attentively listening as Lumian recounted his strategic utilization of the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s resources to pinpoint and eliminate Guillaume Bénet, the heretic.

When Lumian mentioned how the former padre of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church had embraced the entity known as Inevitability in pursuit of power and strength, Mr. K lowered his head and traced a cross upon his chest in a deliberate up-and-down, left-to-right motion. His voice, hoarse and subdued, chanted a prayer, "Merciful Father, forgive the world's transgressions."

Lumian's lips twitched, mirroring Mr. K's penance, although he couldn't fathom the necessity of such repentance.

Post-repentance, he succinctly recounted Aurore's dual nature and the sinister Sinners organization that underpinned Roche Louise Sanson. Finally, he said, "Mr. K, I request your aid in locating the original family of Aurore—or rather, Roche Louise Sanson. They may well be tied to the Sinners, a heretical group devoted to Inevitability."

Mr. K's face, obscured beneath a voluminous hood, remained shrouded in shadow. His words, tinged with satisfaction, hoarsely resonated. "I understand your desire to avenge Aurore. There is no problem in that. The benevolent Father and the omnipotent God do not bar believers from securing their own futures. If they can intertwine personal matters with the sacred crusade against heresy, all the better.

"In this endeavor, leveraging your assets and harnessing the resources of the Iron and Blood Cross Order to fulfill your objective is a strategy I admire. Strive for more of such feats.

"I'll investigate the Sinners."

He agreed to Lumian's request as it aligned perfectly with his own aspirations.

By unearthing Roche Louise Sanson's family, he could deal with the Sinners, a faction devoted to the evil god, Inevitability!

"Thank you, Mr. K," Lumian said sincerely.

He pondered for a moment before proceeding, "The death of Guillaume Bénet might trigger an intensified pursuit from the official Beyonders. I'm wondering if there exists a mystical item that would suit my needs, enabling me to alter my appearance and stature at will?"

He was seeking a means to assume Aurore's identity, infiltrating the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society as Muggle.

Mr. K's tone shifted abruptly, infused with zeal.

"Only the Lifeblood I possess can accomplish what you seek. So long as you can master your flesh and blood, altering your height and appearance becomes attainable. While it may not provide an exact replica of your desires, it suffices to veil your true identity. The caveat lies in the necessity for early injection and its limited duration. You won't possess the liberty to transform at your whim."

Precision isn't required; members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society assume disguises, masking their true selves during gatherings… Yet, that falls short. A perceptive Spectator might notice something from Aurore's eyes or the contour of the chin. To fully pass off as Muggle and dupe everyone, the masked face must mirror Aurore's flawlessly… Plus, the adverse effects of Lifeblood are beyond my tolerance… Lumian's thoughts coalesced, and he articulated his response.

"I'm concerned that administering Lifeblood could revert me to the most primordial human archetype. Despite the Lord's protection mitigating severe physical and mental consequences, the Iron and Blood Cross Order could easily detect the anomaly and discern my true allegiance."

Mr. K sighed in disappointment.

"That's a problem. Though I believe the Lord will safeguard you, preserving your devout persona from exposure, your concerns bear merit."

Having declined the offer of Lifeblood, Lumian continued, "Recently, the Iron and Blood Cross Order tasked me with an interaction…"

He detailed Gardner Martin's summons, narrating until the culmination of the King's Pie game.

The sole omission was Termiboros's warning, the reason subtly placed on his intricate grasp of mysticism. A niggling suspicion prodded him to sidestep the matter, avoiding any potential anomalies.

Mr. K listened attentively, refraining from interjection. As Lumian concluded, Mr. K stood and paced the room.

"Your next objective is to figure out the Iron and Blood Cross Order's rationale for engaging the Sauron family. Are they coveting the Saurons' inheritance or considering collaboration?"

"Yes, Mr. K." Lumian recognized the need for him to remain well-informed, irrespective of Mr. K's order.

Mr. K halted his pacing, fixing his gaze on Lumian.

"Your intuition is sound. Should any mishap occur within that game, it could set off a mystical catastrophe.

"The central figure of Poufer's sacrifice, Vermonda Sauron, held significant standing within the Sauron royal family of that era. Born into the Champagne lineage, he was adopted into the main family by King Odo the 12th, who invested resources in his upbringing.

"Vermonda began auspiciously but met a negative end. His later years saw him vanish without a trace, dealing a heavy blow to the Sauron dynasty. In the ensuing

two decades, several prominent Sauron family members met untimely and mysterious deaths, or succumbed to sudden insanity. The family's power dwindled, paving the way for Roselle's eventual overthrow."

Emperor Roselle's successful usurpation of the Sauron Dynasty was partly facilitated by the apparent decline of the ancient royal line? Vermonda's inexplicable disappearance spanned two to three centuries. How could today's sacrifice catalyze a dangerous mystical shift? Lumian's thoughts raced, absorbing the details recounted by Mr. K.

…

Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Jenna, having gleaned some insights from the Purifiers, sought out Franca in hopes of sharing her findings.

As her gaze roamed the room, Jenna's attention was drawn to the slightly ajar master bedroom door, from which emanated a rhythmic tapping sound.

"Franca?" she called.

Franca's clear voice resounded.

"I'm here! Come inside."

Jenna, who had never entered Franca's bedroom, hesitated for a moment before walking over and pushing open the door.

A burst of amazement brightened her blue eyes as they fell upon an intricate apparatus nestled against the wall, distant from the window.

The contraption consisted of a myriad of interlocking gears encircling brass cylinders, interconnected through levers, crankshafts, and screws.

In awe, Jenna regarded the towering device and inquired, "What is this?"

Seated before the elaborate mechanism, Franca's fingers danced across a state-of-the-art mechanical typewriter as she proudly introduced it to her companion, "This is a third-generation difference engine, cleverly modified—a sort of analyzer. It's a truncated version, simplified and miniaturized. The complete model wouldn't fit in my room."

"Are you really a believer of the God of Steam and Machinery?" Jenna blurted out.

Franca chuckled and explained, "Sometimes."

Jenna's scrutiny lingered on the so-called analyzer, revealing the connection of a telegraph machine and two metallic mechanical typewriters at its lower end.

It wasn't long before Franca ceased her typing, and the analyzer's mechanical appendage set the second typewriter into motion, producing letters upon pristine paper. The energy and information seemed to flow from the radio transceiver.

"What… what are you doing?" Jenna felt illiterate.

Franca happily pointed at the analyzer and said, "When the coding remains consistent, this contraption can automatically decode telegrams and codes for me. Through the metallic fingers linked to the mechanical typewriter's keypad, it types the corresponding letters, shaping the intended words.

"In essence, I can directly read the content of telegrams. No need to laboriously decode the encrypted messages I receive. It saves me considerable time and effort.

"Likewise, I can draft telegrams in standard language. The machine will autonomously encode them and transmit them via a predetermined radio frequency."

Studying the gears as they turned in their various states, Jenna struggled to grasp Franca's intent.

"But what's the purpose?" she asked, befuddled.

Franca was caught off guard.

"Purpose? Well, the purpose is to simplify telegram conversations. Make it something mundane and routine. Though admittedly, it does consume quite a bit of paper."

"Telegram conversations?" Jenna felt a touch of perplexity.

Franca had constructed such an intricate apparatus and embarked on such an elaborate matter simply for conversation?

The late-night typewriter sounds were Franca engaged in casual chatting?

"Exactly," Franca affirmed with a self-satisfied grin. "A friend of mine in the Loen military agreed to share the information Anthony Reid seeks during that timeframe. We just had a brief exchange."

While Franca could easily request the pertinent information from Madam Judgment, she preferred not to burden her Major Arcana cardholder unless absolutely necessary.

As Franca finished speaking, the analyzer completed its task of typewriting, and the telegram materialized in Intisian.

Snatching the paper, Franca's countenance darkened as she scanned its contents.

…

At night, in Apartment 601.

Lumian, Anthony Reid, Franca, and Jenna reassembled.

Waving the paper in her grip, Franca addressed Anthony Reid, stating, “I’ve received a response. The Loen military’s official report on the encounter states: No such battle occurred!”

“No such battle occurred?” Anthony Reid’s eyes widened as he jolted to his feet.

No battle at all? Lumian arched an eyebrow.

Such a response was undeniably unexpected.

Franca nodded gently, her gaze fixed on Anthony Reid.

“To put it simply, it’s highly probable that the assault against you and your companions was not executed by the Loen army!”

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Chapter 344 - 344 Boxing Gloves

344 Boxing Gloves

“Not by the Loen army…” Anthony Reid muttered under his breath, his eyes distant.

Franca’s demeanor, the subtle shifts in her expressions and body language—it all told him that Franca wasn’t lying; she wasn’t bluffing him!

This revelation rendered his years of suffering, of misattributed blame, into a cruel jest.

As a Psychiatrist, Anthony Reid was acutely attuned to the waves of disillusionment that crashed through his psyche. His emotional stability quivered, struck by a potent aftershock.

Instinctively, he used Placate on himself.

As Anthony Reid struggled to “save” himself, Franca elaborated, “Either the battle’s secrecy is of the highest order, barring my Loenese friend from obtaining the truth for now, or a different faction entirely orchestrated the assault on your unit.”

Her inclination leaned toward the latter possibility. In the grand scheme of the Loen Kingdom, this skirmish was a minor one. Anthony’s company held no strategic value, no pivotal figures, so there was no reason for a high-level concealment.

“Who could it be?” Jenna had already raised this question after reading the telegram, but both of them couldn’t come up with a reasonable answer.

She even speculated that an Instigator might have sowed seeds of internal discord amidst the Intis army to digest a potion. This made one of the companies impersonate as Loenese soldiers, launching a deadly nocturnal assault on Anthony Reid and his comrades.

However, this was far too difficult. No matter how formidable an Instigator was, there was no hope of success unless Anthony Reid’s company had discovered evidence of someone’s serious crimes or formed a deep feud with other companies due to conflicts on the battlefield.

“Indeed, who could it be…” Anthony Reid, now more composed thanks to his Placate, intoned with a voice etched in determination.

He understood why the Loen army would attack him and his comrades—their animosity, though intense, was comprehensible within the context of war. But an attack from an unknown faction? That puzzled him.

Franca pondered for a moment and said, “Did your unit forsake allies on the battlefield? Or perhaps lay claim to spoils of war that weren’t rightfully yours?”

Anthony Reid ruminated briefly before shaking his head resolutely. “No.”

Lumian chimed in with conviction, “Absolutely not. This ties back to Hugues Artois. It can’t be a squabble between comrades or external rivals.”

Jenna, absorbed in contemplation, posed another question, “Did you defy Hugues Artois’s orders? Or did your actions inadvertently cost him something?”

Anthony Reid shook his head again.

“If I had, I wouldn’t have grappled with years of puzzlement.”

Silence enveloped Apartment 601, a contemplative hush broken only by Lumian’s recollection. A shard of Madam Magician’s prior words tugged at his thoughts, and he ventured,

“Could it be a sacrificial rite? A blood offering to an evil god?”

“Blood sacrifice…” Franca and Jenna recalled the support various evil god factions had given Hugues Artois.

Anthony Reid fell silent for a moment before saying, “The heretics, disguised as the Loen army, orchestrated our annihilation with Hugues Artois’s complicity?”

Franca said insightfully, “It’s the most logical explanation, though the question remains—who gains? Certainly not Hugues Artois. He reaped no boons, not even in death.”

For a moment, no one could answer Franca’s question.

After a few seconds, Lumian said, “That’s one of the avenues we must delve into as we proceed. It might intertwine with Hugues Artois’s ascent to power and his parliamentary role.”

Upon hearing this, Jenna recounted the information she had obtained from the Purifiers and concluded, “The pressing issue lies in the fact that General Philip, who seems the most suspicious, is already deceased. It’s as if all the threads converge at a sudden dead-end.”

“He died just in time.” Franca chuckled. “A pre-emptive elimination, perhaps?”

Lumian stroked his chin and spoke slowly, “In the world of mysticism, certain deaths don’t necessarily mean true demise.”

Madam Justice had mentioned that an evil god's boon had a Deceased Sequence. They could use death to escape their original fate.

Similarly, if General Philip had used the Substitution Spell, the one who died might not be the real him.

Franca, who had previously helped with finishing Guillaume Bénet, immediately understood.

"Substitution Spell?"

"We cannot dismiss the possibility." Lumian smiled. "Our immediate objective remains the investigation of General Philip, ascertaining the truth of his demise. Even if he is truly dead, there may be traces he left behind, undiscovered by the Purifiers due to the constraints imposed on them."

Anthony Reid, though still grappling with the shattering revelations, felt the warmth of unity and purpose in his companions' discourse. It bolstered his resolve, a spark of renewed determination igniting within him.

He nodded slightly and said, "There's no need to rush. This matter must be very complicated. I'll first gather preliminary information about General Philip, his family, and friends."

After Anthony Reid took his leave, Lumian observed Franca preparing to head to Rue des Fontaines in search of Gardner Martin, so he left Apartment 601 with her.

As they walked down the stairs, Lumian broached the subject of his conversation with Hela, sharing the details with Franca.

Her excitement burgeoned as she absorbed his words, a fervor building within her.

"Great! Great! Quickly transform into Muggle. Let's make contact with April Fool's together!"

"Why are you so excited?" Lumian glanced at him.

Franca made a tongue-clicking sound and chuckled.

"Back home, there's a saying that goes— if you get drenched in the rain, rip up someone else's umbrella. Haha, it's all in jest, but isn't it interesting? Even though your appearance leans towards masculinity, a few simple adjustments can render you strikingly beautiful. Once the Pyromaniac potion has been digested, have you not considered having a potion of Pleasure? Sigh, forget it. There's still some risk before reaching Sequence 4."

Laughter and jesting flowed between them, Franca's demeanor then taking a more serious turn as they reached the street

“Unfortunately…” Lumian echoed the sentiment, a tinge of regret shading his words.

His curiosity then led him to inquire about Emperor Roselle and the perplexing attitudes of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members.

Franca’s expression turned strange, as if she struggled to suppress a bout of laughter.

After a moment, she exhaled and said, “This matter is quite complicated. It’s difficult to explain in a few words. I’ll explain in detail tomorrow or the day after tomorrow when I’m free. In short, be mentally prepared.”

“How complicated can it be?” Lumian muttered. He bade Franca farewell and commenced his journey toward Rue Anarchie.

Upon reaching Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré, despite having already deciphered the issue with Aurore’s grimoires and no longer needing to delve into them, Lumian’s habits dictated that he retrieve the copies and skim through their contents, his thoughts wandering amidst the scattered pages.

Approaching midnight, a stirring within Lumian’s heart drew his gaze toward the carbide lamp.

The light it emitted bore a dark green hue.

The “doll” messenger, clad in a light-gold dress, suddenly materialized. It glared coldly at Lumian, as if striving to contain its emotions.

With twin thuds, a pair of iron-black boxing gloves, adorned with multiple short thorns, landed soundlessly on the table. The impact carried a resonance more akin to wood meeting wood than metal striking wood.

Simultaneously, a folded sheet of paper drifted toward Lumian.

“Thank you.” Although the “doll” messenger quickly vanished, Lumian still expressed his gratitude politely.

He refrained from touching the boxing gloves for now, opting to unfold the piece of paper and peruse the contents of Madam Magician’s message.

“The Shadow Branch and the Lucky One Beyonder characteristic have been made into a mystical item.

“How does it fare? Has its form been modified, rendering it more convenient for transport? This is a masterpiece forged by a master.

“It remains nameless for now. With common words, you could dub it the ‘Lucky Shadow Boxing Glove.’ For a touch of panache, ‘Flog’ could be a stylish choice. The name is yours to determine.

“Any target struck by this glove, regardless of creating injuries, whether they defend with a weapon or not, will undergo a surge of desire or emotion. The specific emotion hinges on your luck. Yet, with the presence of Lucky One, you can envision or simulate the corresponding desires and emotions ahead of time, guiding the target’s reaction. The success rate stands impressively high—around 70 to 80%.

“Following the trigger of a target’s desires or emotions, a second strike won’t engender new feelings. Instead, there’s a likelihood of causing the pre-existing desires or emotions to erupt. This unleashes an overwhelming tidal wave on most targets, inflicting significant harm, even rendering them temporarily incapacitated.

“While the likelihood of invoking desire or emotion with each hit isn’t substantial, repetitive blows will eventually yield the desired outcome—unless you are cursed with bad luck that counteracts the influence of Lucky One.

“However, the glove’s most exceptional facet isn’t its offensive potential, but its defensive capabilities. It possesses unparalleled sturdiness, capable of withstanding an assault from a Reaper without incurring any damage. (Note: Reaper refers to Sequence 5 of the Hunter pathway.) Naturally, this hinges on the attack squarely targeting the glove. In such a scenario, there’s even a possibility of taking a strike infused with godhood, at the expense of shattering or fracturing the glove. This probably places the glove at Sequence 4.

“On the downside, carrying the glove will erode your self-control, intensifying the oscillations of various desires and emotions. Withstanding this requires exceptional endurance. Moreover, while donning the glove, you will attract the attention of a hidden entity since it originated from the Tree of Shadow. While They cannot directly harm you for various reasons, They can summon dangerous entities to your vicinity, influencing or attacking you.

“Hence, each use of the boxing gloves should be accompanied by a change of location, and their usage should not be for extended periods. Failure to adhere to these guidelines may attract hidden dangers. However, should you maintain your composure and endure one or two attacks, the world will expel those dangerous entities who can’t truly descend here.

“Ah, one last detail—your two Psychiatrists request a final follow-up consultation at the usual time tomorrow afternoon.”

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Chapter 345 - 345 Dream

345 Dream

I need exceptional endurance to withstand the weakening of self-control brought about by carrying the Flog. The waves of various desires and emotions surge stronger… Alms Monk excels in handling such situations… While reading Madam Magician's letter, Lumian swiftly considered if he could fulfill the conditions for using the mystical item.

With this in mind, Lumian recollected the adverse effects of Contractee contracts.

A substantial portion of them seemed to be mitigated by Alms Monk's resilience and self-restraint.

First acquiring the Alms Monk boon prior to becoming a Contractee. Could it be that one must bolster their endurance to endure a contract? Otherwise, the padre with over ten negative effects would have self-destructed long ago…

Yes, Guillaume Bénet's utilization of Alms Monk and Ascetic powers wasn't overly adept. Could this stem from his ingrained indulgence, making change difficult? Or did he leap directly into being a Contractee before evolving into a Fate Appropriator? His grasp of the Alms Monk and Ascetic boons seemed inadequate, relying largely on instinct. Lumian murmured to himself.

Recalling how the padre in the dream transformed from an ordinary individual to a Fate Appropriator within a day, Lumian was more inclined to believe the latter possibility. He surmised that the events in the dream marked Guillaume Bénet's advancement to a Fate Appropriator with only two to three boons.

Lumian redirected his attention to the letter in his hand and read through the remainder in one go.

Concerning the utilization of the Flog boxing gloves to attract perilous creatures, he intended to seize an opportunity and approach Franca for assistance to verify the precise circumstances.

If indeed hazardous, he would need to contemplate reserving one usage of spirit world traversal to escape any future influence or attack.

Crimson flames silently surged, setting the letter ablaze, its words turning to ash.

Amidst the dispersed ashes, Lumian reached out his hand toward the iron-black boxing gloves.

Although they lacked the metallic texture and chilliness, they were exceptionally rigid.

Almost in unison, two voices resonated in Lumian's mind:

One was the voice of the eloping couple, casting curses; the other was the voice of inebriated individuals shattering bottles and clamoring in the street.

The former set Lumian's imagination ablaze, while the latter spurred him to draw his revolver and open fire.

The sensations weren't overpowering and could be endured and repressed.

After confirming the fit of the boxing gloves, Lumian set them beside the pillow.

…

In the depths of night, in a hazy state, Lumian felt as though he had stepped into an ancient beige castle. Its exterior bore numerous dark and crimson stains, as if drenched in a copious amount of blood.

Hysterical laughter and shouts reverberated from within the castle. Lumian instinctively raised his gaze and spotted a deep-red visage peering at him through a narrow window on the third floor.

Fine blood vessels detached from their sockets, leaving behind a pair of inky-black, blood-soaked cavities.

Lumian's thoughts blurred as he involuntarily stepped into the ancient castle.

What unfurled before his eyes were gruesome scenes: The maid rent her abdomen with a dining knife, drawing forth pallid intestines marred by blood. The valets ascended the staircase to the second floor, only to throw themselves back into the hall, repeating their falls in a macabre cycle. The butler clutched a comely female head, his lower body severed. He dragged himself with his elbows, leaving behind a broad and extended trail of blood. The headless mistress sat in an armchair, lifted her cup of coffee, and poured it into the gash on her neck…

The pungent stench of blood and the frenzied ambiance pierced Lumian's mind, snapping his eyes open.

He beheld the familiar, squalid ceiling and caught the ceaseless nocturnal clamor of Rue Anarchie.

Had it all been a dream? The scene from his dream lingered in Lumian's memory, a residual unease remaining.

As a Beyonder seasoned with the world of mysticism, he didn't underestimate such a dream.

It likely bore the marks of a revelation through Astral Projection or an external influence.

Swiftly reviewing the day's occurrences, Lumian zeroed in on two potential "culprits."

Could it be the lingering effects of the King's Pie game from earlier, or perhaps linked to the impact of the Flog boxing gloves?

He cast a glance at the iron-black spiked boxing gloves, left untouched beside his pillow, sensing that the game was the likely trigger.

An attempt to commune with Termiboros yielded no response.

After securing the Flog boxing gloves within a drawer in his wooden table, Lumian drifted back into slumber.

Throughout that night, nightmares plagued him repeatedly. Each instance, he encountered the bizarre ancient castle.

Fortunately, the dream's lucidity waned progressively, eventually melding into a commonplace nightmare.

…

The following morning, Lumian adhered to his routine of jogging and practicing boxing, then set out in search of a distinctive breakfast in the bustling market district.

After spending nearly the entirety of the morning at Salle de Bal Brise, he eventually found himself standing before Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

With a flush on her face and a lively demeanor, Franca answered the door. "You're quite the eager one."

Lumian was forthright about his intentions.

"Remember you mentioned wanting to discuss Emperor Roselle with me?"

"Well, well…" Franca's expression shifted oddly once more.

She grumbled, "I'm feeling unwell!"

As Franca led him to the living room, she muttered, "It's empathetic embarrassment!"

Lumian shut the door and took a seat on the sofa. After a moment's thought, he inquired, "Is this embarrassment on behalf of Emperor Roselle?"

“Exactly.” Franca, seated cross-legged in a recliner, scratched her flaxen hair. “I’m seriously concerned that he might be so mortified that he’ll rise from the grave to strangle anyone who’s privy to the information!”

After a rather odd comment, Franca sighed and explained, “In simpler terms, Emperor Roselle, like us, hails from another world.”

“Emperor Roselle is also one of the transmigrators you mentioned?” Lumian blurted out in astonishment.

Franca confirmed succinctly, “Many of his inventions, beliefs, and ideas originated in our world. What’s more significant, his diary was penned in the language of the nation your sister and I come from. That’s why it remained undeciphered for so long until our transmigration.”

Lumian’s mind was a whirlwind of confusion. It all seemed too fantastical, like something out of fiction. However, Aurore’s attitude toward Emperor Roselle and his diary lent credence to Franca’s words.

Seeing his silence, Franca added with understanding, “Nonetheless, he’s an extraordinary individual. Progressing from a mere Sequence 9 individual, he ascended the paths of the divine step by step, overthrowing the Sauron Dynasty and enacting monumental changes upon Intis and the world. His impact on the history of the past two to three centuries and generations of humanity is profound.”

That’s true. Emperor Roselle once said that a hero is a hero, irrespective of their origins… Where Emperor Roselle came from was immaterial… Lumian quickly collected his thoughts and asked with curiosity, “Did Emperor Roselle’s famous quotations originate from philosophers in your world?”

“Many of them did.” Franca, in a way, supported her fellow countryman’s public image. “But some are genuinely his own. Consider this: a person who’s undergone so much, tasted both triumph and failure, must possess unique insights across various domains. He’s not lacking in memorable sayings.”

Now I understand why Aurore chuckles whenever I mention something Emperor Roselle said… A realization dawned on Lumian. He grasped his sister’s sentiments at that moment and the jesting tone the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society adopted toward the Emperor.

He then inquired, “Did one of you write Emperor Roselle’s Secret Chronicles?”

“Yes, but I’m unsure who the author is,” Franca honestly admitted. “The writer possesses quite the literary talent.”

“Is everything in there accurate?” Lumian contemplated seeking out an underground bookseller to procure a copy.

Franca chuckled. “About half of it. Even among the portions based on actual events, half of that is a sensationalized expansion of a couple sentences from the Emperor’s diary into a narrative rife with explicit details. For instance, the Emperor once shared more than just friendship with a Demoness…”

Franca suddenly paused.

Realization dawned upon her that she herself was now a Demoness.

A worthwhile addition to my collection… Emperor Roselle does seem to live up to the legendary reputation of being a flirt… Lumian’s anticipation for the underground book grew.

He opted not to delve further into the topic of the Emperor and the Demoness. Instead, he brought up the King’s Pie game from the prior day and the subsequent nightmarish dreams. He then sought Franca’s insights as an adept practitioner of divination.

“What revelations are hidden in that dream?”

“I can’t decipher it,” Franca said after a prolonged pause. “It conveys a sense of danger and advises to stay away. Also, those nightmares appear to be lingering effects from some form of insanity.”

Lumian contemplated for a moment, deciding not to probe deeper for the time being. He planned to consult the two Psychiatrists later in the day.

…

At 3:20 p.m., Lumian reached Mason Café in Quartier du Jardin Botanique and took a seat in Booth D. He requested a cup of aromatic Intis coffee and two cream-filled cupcakes.

Once the coffee and confections were served, he patiently waited for a minute or so before catching the sound of Susie’s gentle, feminine voice.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Lumian Lee.”

Lumian responded with an easy smile.

“Good afternoon, Madam Susie. Good afternoon, Madam Justice.”

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Chapter 346 - 346 Follow-Up Visit

346 Follow-Up Visit

“How did you know I was here?” Madam Justice’s voice held a smile.

Lumian gazed at the chair across from him and responded, a grin tugging at his lips, “Can’t hurt to extend a greeting.”

Susie steered the conversation forward, “Congratulations on completing the initial phase of your vendetta. Care for a brief discussion?”

“No problem.” Lumian’s composure remained unshaken, not even flinching at the mention of “vendetta.”

Of course, part of his calm demeanor stemmed from the fact that he hadn’t brought along the Flog boxing gloves. This was a psychological evaluation, after all. He couldn’t allow external influences to taint his thoughts and skew the doctor’s judgment.

From the point of seeking assistance and crafting a strategy, he recounted his experiences of the past two days. He glossed over the secret of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society but provided a concise account of everything else.

Following a momentary silence, Susie’s soothing voice resumed its course.

“Your mental state has held up admirably. A certain degree of overreaction in specific scenarios is par for the course. Psychiatric therapy doesn’t strip a person of their emotions or feelings. Instead, it aids in unburdening oneself, fostering reconciliation, and discovering inner resilience. Nightmares won’t deal a devastating blow to you any longer. Otherwise, according to the more dubious therapists who advocate severing the frontal lobe for eternal tranquility, you’ll forever be at peace.”

“Removing the frontal lobe?” Lumian’s ears caught wind of this concept for the first time.

Susie’s tone tinged with revulsion.

“It’s a notion that has cropped up in the last couple of years. It doesn’t yield the intended outcomes; rather, it inflicts grave harm upon the patient. There’s an evident malevolence behind this treatment proposal. It’s as if some callous individual propagated it with the sole intention of making a mockery out of medical professionals and those seeking solace.”

A prank that toys with the lives of others? Lumian shifted gears, steering the conversation onto a different course.

“Madam Susie, you haven’t even delved into my emotions or analyzed my thoughts, yet you’ve already deduced that I’ve made some strides towards recovery, and a follow-up might not be necessary?”

Susie’s demeanor lifted rapidly, and she replied with a grin, “At times, a person’s actions can be more telling of their psychological state than their thoughts. Understand that humans excel at deceiving themselves. They concoct a slew of rationales for their actions, which often stand less grounded in reality than their deeds. To decipher an accurate psychological portrait from this labyrinth of complex and contradictory thoughts requires meticulous analysis. But such scrutiny can easily unearth problems. Hence, I chose to commence with an examination of your actions.

“Evidently, whether you’re willing to admit it or not, you’ve successfully reestablished social connections and fostered a level of trust in others. You’ve also exhibited a willingness to extend your trust to others.

“Prior to your ambush of Guillaume Bénet, you demonstrated the capacity for calm contemplation and thorough preparation. While there were impulsive undertones and hints of macabre inclinations in your operation, they were inevitable. Their absence would only have hinted at more severe psychological turmoil. And once the affair concluded, you swiftly reverted to your norm and dived right back into life, embarking on another investigation.

“Grounded in the sequence of actions you’ve undertaken, I extend my congratulations. The pronounced self-destructive tendencies have lost their grip, and you’ve truly extricated yourself from the abyss of agony.

“Naturally, the pain won’t dissipate entirely. It will wane and recede. Perhaps it might resurge abruptly in the future, once again occupying your mind. Yet, there’s no need to succumb to panic. Armed with this period of experience, I trust you’re equipped to navigate it adeptly. Psychologically speaking, this signals a path to recovery.

“In similar fashion, the past invariably leaves its imprints upon us. Your self-destructive propensities, your extremities, your pathological behaviors—no doubt they’re more potent than in most individuals, but they all abide by the bounds of reason and normalcy.”

In response, Lumian let out a slow exhale and murmured, “I sense it myself, honestly. The present me is an entirely different person from the one who initially set foot in Trier.

“Thank you, Madam Susie. Thank you, Madam Justice.”

He realized that his transformation from an initial state of apathy was thanks to the efforts of these two psychiatrists and his escapades in the market district. The

prospect of death itself had lost its sting. He had shifted from a vindictive malevolent specter to an individual fueled by an ardent thirst for retribution, driven by a potent desire for action.

“In essence, this is your own redemption.” Susie’s tone brimmed with a delight not present before. “The primary contributors to this turnaround are none other than yourself and your sister, Aurore. Were it not for the tiniest ember of hope that you harbored, coupled with your will to persist, and were it not for Miss Aurore gifting you nearly six years of cherished moments to savor and to mold your thoughts, we might not have been able to reel you back in.”

As Lumian processed these words, a montage of scenes flickered across his mind: Aurore inhaling deeply, using the breaths to temper the vexation derived from instructing him. The tempestuous storms of combat training, coupled with her impromptu “attacks.” The two of them ensconced in the study, each absorbed in their respective books, relishing the tranquility of the night. And, as the number one experimental subject, he was obligated to consume the culinary reproductions of food back home that his sister conjured, be they successes or failures…

Lumian’s expression softened as he recollected a line from his sister’s novel: The joy and pain of days past are equal to the me of the present.

After a pause lasting more than ten seconds, he straightened in his seat and queried, “Were last night’s nightmares all rooted in the King’s Pie game?”

This time, it was Madam Justice who responded, her voice soft with understanding, “Indeed. Considering the current situation, it’s likely that you were mentally corrupted during that time.”

“Mental corruption? Does it actually involve Beyonder powers?” Lumian asked with genuine curiosity.

Madam Justice replied, “Ordinarily, the simple act of sacrificing a King’s Pie wouldn’t have yielded any results. Otherwise, the game wouldn’t have remained a popular tradition in Intis for centuries, fading into obscurity only after the establishment of the Republic. Only a handful of families still recall it.”

“Yes, that’s what I assumed back then. Poufer didn’t employ any mystical language or invoke a complete honorific name. It’s implausible for the sacrifice to succeed,” Lumian concurred.

Madam Justice continued, “Nevertheless, exceptions exist—sacrificers who share blood ties with the subject of the sacrifice and exhibit numerous similarities.

“If you participate frequently in Poufer’s King’s Pie game and repeatedly endure the mental corruption it entails, the ramifications won’t dissolve with a mere spate of nightmares. Rather, before they fully dissipate, they’ll progressively warp your psyche and lead you into madness.”

“Could the content of these nightmares be symbolic?” Lumian inquired succinctly.

Madam Justice's response flowed measuredly.

"It's highly probable that they're a fusion of specific deranged occurrences from your past, projected into your dreamscape through the taint of corruption."

"So, that ancient castle and those deranged individuals could really exist…" Lumian mused, nodding in contemplation.

As Lumian engaged in a conversation with Justice and Susie for a while, he intuited that the day's follow-up session was drawing to a close.

In that instance, Madam Justice took the lead, saying, "Didn't I mention previously that I might require your assistance with something?"

"Of course, no problem," Lumian swiftly agreed.

Consider it the cost of the psychiatric treatment!

Moreover, he held the belief that Madam Justice wouldn't have entrusted him with the task without assessing his capabilities. The endeavor couldn't be excessively dangerous.

Madam Justice chuckled and said, "Should you succeed, I shall bestow an additional reward upon you, one that will cater to your requirements in a specific manner."

"Something capable of altering my appearance?" Lumian's heart skipped a beat with excitement.

"Something along those lines." Madam Justice's initially gentle tone turned solemn. "I'm hoping you can venture to an ancient tomb situated on the fourth floor of Trier's catacombs, specifically to retrieve a vial of the Samaritan Women's Spring for me."

Samaritan Women's Spring? Lumian was taken aback.

Madame Hela had previously mentioned that she had journeyed to Trier in pursuit of an artifact hidden deep within the catacombs. Concurrently, she had inquired about the legend surrounding the Samaritan Women's Spring!

Wasn't this too much of a coincidence?

Almost as if she sensed his thoughts, Madam Justice chimed in with a smile, "Don't you find it too coincidental?

"Yes, what I'm hoping for is that you can leverage Madame Hela's exploration to assist me in securing some Samaritan Women's Spring water. Doing so yourself might yield slim chances of success.

“In truth, I could ‘arrange’ for you to undertake this task in a more clandestine manner, but that approach contradicts my philosophy and principles. I still require face-to-face communication with you and your explicit consent for such matters. I’m disinclined to ensnare you passively through covert cues to fulfill my objectives.

“For me, indulging in the manipulation of others’ minds is a treacherous endeavor.

“Of course, honesty is also an effective way at influencing others’ thoughts.”

Lumian’s skepticism and doubts gradually ebbed away. He inquired, perplexed, “Madam Justice, given that you possess a general awareness of the Samaritan Women’s Spring’s approximate location, why wouldn’t you retrieve it yourself? Why involve a Sequence 7 Beyonder like me?”

The Tarot Club’s Major Arcana card was definitely a demigod, countless times stronger than him!

Madam Justice laughed.

“To put it succinctly, certain locales become progressively hazardous with an increase in Sequence.”

A location where higher Sequences meet with increased danger? Lumian found this notion confounding.

Madam Justice added, “As Sequences rise, proximity to the Oldest One increases, accumulating more madness along the way. Consequently, individuals in higher Sequences are more susceptible to particular forms of corruption.

“Hela is also beneficial in this matter. At the very least, this approach will save her time and permit her to narrow down her search to a designated area.”

After a brief contemplation, Lumian agreed to Madam Justice’s request. From her, he gleaned the approximate location of the Samaritan Women’s Spring—situated within the westernmost ancient tomb on the fourth floor of the catacombs.

…

Following the session, Lumian made his way back to Rue des Blouses Blanches in the market district, his objective being the retrieval of the Flog boxing gloves from the iron cabinet.

Upon his arrival at the safe house, an odd inkling settled upon him.

Intrusion!

Someone had infiltrated his safe house!

Lumian’s heart tightened as he advanced with purpose, unlatching the iron cabinet.

While observing that Aurore's grimoires and the Flog boxing gloves remained, a sigh of relief escaped him involuntarily.

However, he proceeded to conduct a thorough inspection, and his scrutiny bore fruit. One article was conspicuously absent—the Earth Blood ore was gone!

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Chapter 347 - 347 Strange Theft

347 Strange Theft

Looking at the open iron cabinet, Lumian found it absurd and surreal.

The thief had entered the house without taking the most valuable Flog boxing glove, nor did they flip through Aurore's grimoires to see if there were any banknotes inside. They had only taken a mineral specimen that didn't look like a gem at all.

Disregarding the traps, if the thief were truly a Marauder with Beyonder powers, he wouldn't have given up on the boxing gloves made of unique materials and capable of powerful abilities. If he were just an ordinary thief, he wouldn't have just taken the Earth Blood ore. He might have even casually thrown the seemingly worthless item to the ground.

All of this led Lumian to suspect that the thieving intruder had only one motive: take away the Earth Blood ore!

The other party clearly knew what was special about the mineral specimen and was attempting to exploit it!

"Termiboros, who stole the Earth Blood ore?" Lumian couldn't identify any suspect no matter how hard he thought.

Apart from dealing with Guillaume Bénet a few days ago when he retrieved the Earth Blood ore and handed it to Franca, he kept the mineral specimen in the safe house. He never carried it with him to avoid being targeted.

Of course, the thief might have divined or prophesied to narrow down the area. He searched every room and finally found the target item.

Termiboros's magnificent voice suddenly resounded.

"I don't know."

Don't know… Lumian was alarmed.

This answer was meaningless, but coming from Termiboros meant many things.

While Termiboros, sealed within Lumian's body, couldn't exert any direct power, his angelic nature granted Him unique insights. As an angel of the Inevitability domain, He possessed an uncanny ability to detect problems and traces that eluded many Low-Sequence Beyonders through Low-Sequence Beyonders's eyes and

fate.

But now, He claimed ignorance!

This revelation carried significant weight, suggesting that whoever had stolen the Earth Blood ore was no ordinary individual. It hinted at the involvement of a high-level power, possibly tied to a secret organization or cult.

Hiss, I have to write a letter and inform Madam Magician about this. After all, she once predicted that the Earth Blood ore would bring me some misfortune. However, the item is lost before the misfortune arrived… Lumian had initially hesitated to burden his Major Arcana card holder with this matter, as he didn't attach much value to the mineral specimen. Its applications were limited, and its loss seemed inconsequential. However, with the situation taking a bizarre turn, he couldn't simply dismiss it.

In the world of mysticism, negligence often led to painful lessons.

Truth be told, Lumian didn't harbor anger over the loss of his possession, nor did he feel compelled to retrieve it. Though the Earth Blood ore might lead to fortuitous encounters, it remained an abstract concept, difficult to quantify or cherish.

Moreover, Madam Magician's warning of potential misfortune made him view its loss as a means to mitigate risk.

Lumian meticulously inspected the safe house once more, confirming that none of the traps had been triggered. Only the Earth Blood ore had vanished. He settled down to compose a letter.

This time, the summoned puppet messenger displayed a less frigid demeanor, no longer suppressing intense emotions.

In mere minutes, Madam Magician's response arrived, concise and to the point: "There's indeed something amiss in this matter. I can't identify the thief of the Earth Blood ore either. If you're not fearful, you can venture to the entrance of Salle de Bal Unique and seek anyone with a monocle in their right eye. Even if they aren't the culprits, they should possess knowledge of the suspect. If you find it too risky, exercise patience. Someone will inquire on your behalf."

Salle de Bal Unique… That makes sense. The Sequence preceding a swindler is Marauder. Could those monocle-wearing individuals hold sway over all the thieves wielding Beyonder powers in Trier? Lumian pondered this in silence.

Aurore's grimoires had mentioned that Marauder occupied Sequence 9 on one of the paths of the divine. Above Marauder was Swindler, and further up was Cryptologist.

After careful consideration, Lumian opted to wait for someone to inquire on his behalf. He had no immediate need for the Earth Blood ore.

The thought of Salle de Bal Unique, Monette, the monocle-wearing Islander swindler, and the swindlers who emulated his style sent shivers down his spine. He preferred to avoid any unnecessary contact for the time being.

After burning the letter, Lumian shifted his attention to the iron cabinet, the repository of Aurore's grimoires, Flog boxing gloves, and various other items.

The once-secure safe house had become compromised, and he needed to find a new location for these possessions.

I'll take Flog with me. I'll carry the rest if I can, and sell what's sellable. If not, I'll secure another safe house… For Aurore's grimoires and the gold, I'll rent an anonymous safe deposit box at a large bank for their safekeeping… When this property's current lease expires, I wouldn't renew it… Lumian had a clear strategy in mind.

His plan encompassed the items he couldn't easily transport or wished to part with, which primarily included the five ritualistic hides, in addition to Aurore's grimoires and his accumulated gold. Finding a new home for these items was a priority, along with securing another safe house for himself.

With these considerations in mind, Lumian began drafting a letter addressed to Hela.

In the letter, he revealed that he had acquired information about the approximate location of the Samaritan Women's Spring through a secretive channel. The information source had tasked him with venturing underground to retrieve a genuine bottle of water from the spring.

However, as Lumian was writing, he felt a sense of puzzlement.

It seemed unnecessary for him to be directly involved when he could have entrusted Hela with the task of obtaining the spring water on his behalf.

Madam Justice should have considered this. Why am I required to descend into the fourth level of the catacombs personally? Is it because of the perceived difficulty Hela might encounter in procuring the water by herself? She needs my assistance?

What's so special about me? Apart from the angel sealed within me, my Sequence isn't high…

Madame Hela's Sequence is relatively high. It's relatively dangerous for her to approach the Samaritan Women's Spring and she will be prone to madness. Am I responsible for monitoring her condition and awaken her if needed?

I previously believed that Madame Hela was at least a Sequence 4. She claimed she could resolve the Cordu problem before the descent ritual, but now it appears she hasn't ascended to a demigod. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to enter the fourth level of the catacombs, let alone approach the Samaritan Women's Spring… Does she possess a Grade 1 Sealed Artifact or a mystical item equivalent to a

saint? Lumian combed through the entire situation and made some guesses and judgments.

Continuing to write, Lumian used the information provider's request as a pretext to express his personal desire to enter the ancient tomb.

After the summoning ritual, the skull, crafted from pure silver and radiating a gentle glow, retrieved the letter and departed.

Before long, a messenger returned with Hela's response: "No problem. I'll meet you at the gates of the Death Empire at 4 p.m. tomorrow."

Phew… Lumian exhaled a sigh of relief, his body trembling with a mix of excitement and trepidation.

His adventurous spirit and penchant for experimentation had always defined him. The bizarre vanishing of the couple in the catacombs had etched a profound mark on his psyche.

…

The next morning, at 11 Rue des Fontaines.

Lumian dutifully arrived at Gardner Martin's villa and reported the details of his meeting with Count Poufer and the other Black Cat members.

Inside, Gardner Martin, unusually excited, sat behind his desk and spoke with a hint of joy,

"Despite your claim of lacking artistic inclination, your background allows you to converse with them effectively. That's precisely why I chose you instead of Albus.

"I was concerned you might not exhibit enough generosity, but you handled it admirably. You even sponsored them with 4,000 verl d'or on your first visit."

Gardner Martin, the Commanding Officer of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, implied that Lumian's status as the younger brother of best-selling author Aurore Lee, even without artistic inclination, provided him with a wealth of insider knowledge about the scandals, grudges, and grievances within the literary and artistic circles.

Lumian, however, didn't waste any time and cut straight to the point. "What I don't understand is why the King's Pie game gave me a sense of danger. I even had a few nightmares last night."

Gardner Martin nodded thoughtfully.

"That's because Poufer is quite unique. He bears a striking resemblance to his ancestor, Vermonda. They share a strong blood connection, which allows them to bypass many crucial steps during a ritual."

“Has his ancestor turned into an evil spirit? How can he still accept sacrifices after centuries?” Lumian asked, basing his question on logical reasoning, without mentioning Mr. K’s account.

Gardner Martin responded with solemnity, “That’s something you should investigate when you approach Poufer. Don’t worry; as long as you don’t participate in the King’s Pie game every two or three days, the only aftereffect you’ll experience is those nightmares. Keep that sense of danger intact and resist becoming a king. It’s easier for you to become a king than anyone else, except for Poufer himself. If you’re uncertain about making the right choice, let Poufer choose first.”

The Iron and Blood Cross Order wants to uncover the whereabouts of the mysterious Vermonda Sauron, who has been missing for centuries? Heh heh, why didn’t they warn me about the dangers of the King’s Pie game beforehand and advise me to be the last to make a choice? Lumian suspected that Gardner Martin hadn’t mentioned it to confirm a crucial matter.

…

In the afternoon, near the Trier Opera House, within a concealed quarry cave, Franca and Jenna, wearing half-masks, once again met the Warlock in the black robe.

He was the same client who had previously commissioned the investigation of the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister’s gatekeeper.

Franca scanned their surroundings, her voice intentionally hoarse as she spoke,

“We’ve made some progress in our investigation regarding the disappearance of the Deep Valley Cloister’s gatekeeper. We wish to discuss it with you privately.”

The man fell silent for over ten seconds before finally nodding. “Very well.”

Their iron-masked skeletal escort led them, along with the client, into a secluded “conversation room” within the quarry cave.

…

With an hour left until their agreed meeting time, Lumian equipped himself with a carbide lamp and entered the market district’s corresponding entrance to Underground Trier.

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Chapter 348 - 348 The Bustling Underground

348 The Bustling Underground

The carbide lamp emitted a bluish-yellow light, casting an eerie glow over the tunnel, which was divided by stone pillars.

Lumian strolled casually, carrying a black canvas bag that had become popular among university students in recent years. Inside, he had stashed the Flog boxing gloves and a stack of white candles.

After conducting numerous experiments, Lumian had discovered that carrying them in his bag was less risky than tucking them into his shirt or pants pockets. While it didn't make a significant difference, it was still better than the alternative.

As he followed the route marked on Gardner Martin's map, leading him toward the underground of Quartier de l'Observatoire, Lumian suddenly perked up his ears, listening for signs of approaching footsteps.

A cacophony of faint footsteps echoed in the air, barely audible.

Lumian scanned the path ahead and to his right, unsure which route the unidentified group would take. To remain inconspicuous, he clambered up to a stone pillar supporting the tunnel's ceiling, extinguishing his carbide lamp, and disappeared into the shadows.

Before long, a group of men emerged.

Most of them wore tattered jackets or were shirtless, hunched over while carrying heavy crates. Over a dozen burly men, dressed in well-worn attire with sinister expressions, held various firearms and carbide lamps, interspersed throughout the group.

Smugglers… Lumian peered out, examining the crates illuminated by the smugglers' lights. They appeared to emit a metallic gleam.

Firearms or something else? He mumbled silently, observing the smuggling caravan as it entered the right tunnel.

As they advanced, possibly due to a shadow that moved too much like a human, one of the smugglers raised his gun, took aim, and fired.

With a resounding bang, the alarm ceased, and the group pressed onward.

Lumian clicked his tongue and shook his head, finding their reaction overly tense and excessive.

In Underground Trier, such actions could easily lead to trouble!

It was well known that aside from university students exploring and citizens cultivating mushrooms to eke out a living, most individuals venturing underground were not to be underestimated. The chances of encountering Beyonders were significantly higher below ground than on the surface. Firing upon any passerby could potentially provoke members of secret organizations, bestowed of evil gods, anti-government militants, or formidable cave adventurers.

With this in mind, Lumian drew his revolver and squeezed the trigger in the direction of the smuggling caravan, which was about to disappear at the end of the tunnel to his right.

He wasn't aiming at anyone, just firing into the air.

Bang! The armed smugglers either spun around or scrambled for cover, unleashing a barrage of bullets at the crossroads.

However, Lumian was no longer concerned. He was already scaling the rock wall, almost reaching the top.

After exchanging gunfire with the empty air for a brief moment, the smugglers shifted their positions nervously, puzzled and flustered.

Lumian observed their backs and couldn't help but smile.

No need for thanks. Consider it a free lesson!

He leaped to the ground and relit his carbide lamp.

Smelling the lingering scent of gunpowder, Lumian grinned and holstered his revolver before continuing along his planned route.

A few minutes later, he came across a group of quarry police officers dressed in dark uniforms, armed with semi-automatic revolvers.

The officer leading the group, upon seeing Lumian's youthful appearance, backpack slung diagonally, and well-dressed attire, muttered under his breath, "Son of a bitch, why is it another college student!?"

He then exhaled loudly and asked, "Did you hear anything just now?"

"There was a gunfight over there. Bang, bang, bang. I wanted to go over and take a look, but I didn't dare," Lumian replied, concealing nothing about the smuggling caravan.

The quarry police officers exchanged glances and swiftly passed Lumian, sprinting toward the intersection.

…

In the “conversation” room.

Observing the iron-masked skeletal host’s departure, the man dressed in Warlock attire turned his attention to Franca and Jenna and said,

“What did you discover? As I mentioned, you need to find the gatekeeper or his remains to claim your reward.”

Jenna replied calmly, “We haven’t really thought about payment yet. We believe the situation is more complex than you described.

“One night, we infiltrated the Deep Valley Quarry…”

Upon hearing the term “Deep Valley Quarry,” the man, hidden under a hooded shadow, subtly lifted his gaze.

Franca keenly observed his body language.

She had consulted with Anthony Reid and knew the kind of subconscious reactions ordinary humans would exhibit in such situations.

The man’s actions suggested he was highly sensitive to the mention of Deep Valley Quarry.

Only someone aware of the issue would react in such a way.

Jenna continued to recount their discoveries, including the cybernetic-eyed monk and the secret cave adorned with limbs.

The Warlock-dressed man remained composed, making no unnecessary movements. However, to Franca, this indicated that he understood the abnormality within Deep Valley Quarry.

After hearing Jenna’s account, the man deliberately raised his voice and said, “I can’t confirm if it’s related to the gatekeeper’s disappearance, but if you can enter the secret cave, capture a few photographs, or retrieve valuable items, I’m willing to offer half the payment upfront. Perhaps you’ll find clues about the gatekeeper’s whereabouts inside.”

Do you take us for fools? Are you expecting us to take such a risk for a mere 10,000 verl d’or? Franca muttered silently.

Had this mysticism gathering not been organized by her friend, she would have found a way to tail the client and uncover his true identity. She could then extract more detailed information from him and have Jenna sell it to the Purifiers.

…

“Halt!

“The Death Empire lies ahead!”

Lumian once again found himself standing in front of the natural arch, adorned with a peculiar mix of white bones, sunflowers, and steam symbols carved into the stone.

Before he could reach for the pocket watch he had borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise to check the time, Hela, dressed in a mysterious widow’s black robe with withered blonde hair, approached from the other side.

The woman nodded slightly and said, “Since you’re already here, let’s proceed ahead of schedule.”

“Very well.” Lumian opened his bag and produced two white candles.

After lighting them and handing one to Hela, he grinned and remarked, “Aren’t you worried that the information I obtained about the Samaritan Women’s Spring might be incorrect?”

“Success comes after numerous failures,” Hela replied with icy detachment.

A chuckle escaped Lumian’s lips.

“I thought you might say that failure is the mother of success.”

“This isn’t the Research Society,” Hela replied tersely.

Lumian didn’t waste any more time. He extinguished his carbide lamp and advanced toward the rocky arch, clutching the white candle, its flame now an intense orange.

As expected, a figure emerged from the shadows beyond the door.

The figure sported a blue vest and yellow pants, with gray hair and few wrinkles. His light-yellow eyes held a faint cloudiness, marking him as an elderly man.

The old man cast a disapproving look at the white candle in Lumian’s hand and asked with a furrowed brow, “Didn’t you find a guide?”

You… Not you guys? Lumian glanced at Hela out of the corner of his eye and realized that the candlelight around her had dimmed, as if it had been corroded by the underground darkness or shrouded in dense fog.

In this state, she appeared to have vanished from the tomb administrator’s view.

Lumian flashed a smile at the old man.

“I don’t require a guide. I’ve been to the tomb many times, though I’m more accustomed to entering through the Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative entrance. Don’t worry, I remember all the taboos, and I won’t deliberately break them.”

The old man snapped, “You college students! Remember, exit before your candles burn out!”

With that, he stepped aside and disappeared into the darkness behind the door.

As Lumian passed through the rocky passage and entered the Death Empire, he turned to the aged tomb administrator and asked curiously, “Why can you hold a lit white candle?”

The tomb administrator’s faintly turbid light-yellow eyes suddenly darkened, and an icy aura emanated from him.

In a deep voice, he replied, “I’m just stationed by the entrance, not venturing too deep.”

Is that so? Lumian, who had already entered the catacombs, rationally abandoned any further inquiry. He focused on the chill in his heart and the unseen gazes from the surrounding darkness.

He couldn’t help but sense a resemblance between the tomb administrator’s current aura and Hela’s presence.

Under the ever-watchful gaze of the corpses in the stone pit and the heaps of bones lining the sides of the passage, Lumian pressed on through the musty air. He walked alongside Hela, passing landmarks like the chapel tomb and the memorial pillar tomb.

Hela broke the silence, her tone frosty. “Which level are we heading to?”

“The fourth level,” Lumian replied, holding the white candle aloft and pointing to a nearby tomb sign, not withholding any information.

Hela nodded once more and picked up her pace, striding ahead of Lumian.

She seemed intimately familiar with the first level of the catacombs. After a few twists and turns, she led Lumian to a staircase that descended to the second level.

Compared to the previous level, there were far fewer tourists here. Occasionally, they encountered university students singing, dancing, or testing their courage under the “gaze” of the candlelit corpses.

Hela showed no signs of slowing down. Soon, Lumian spotted a weathered stone door.

With the candle's flickering yellow glow illuminating the way, he read the Intisian inscription on the stone door: "Entrance to the Old Ossuary."

"Down here, we enter the third level. Just beyond the door is the Sun and Steam altar. Keep walking until you reach the Krismona Night Pillar, and that's where we enter the fourth level," Hela explained, her voice still cold.

"Do you have a complete map of the catacombs?" Lumian couldn't help but inquire, aware that only the map of the first level was readily available on the market.

Hela shook her head.

"I know less the deeper we go. From the third level onward, you have to rely on the road signs and the guiding black line on the cave ceiling."

Lumian chose not to press the matter further. With Hela leading the way, they crossed the threshold of the Old Ossuary and descended a wide stone staircase, imbued with a palpable sense of history.

Upon reaching the third level of the tomb, they encountered a flickering candlelight and a makeshift altar composed of two weathered boulders.

The candle's flame belonged to a young man with black hair, brown eyes, and a pale complexion.

Upon spotting Lumian and Hela, he rushed toward them as if grasping at a lifeline.

As he ran, he shouted, "M-my friends vanished! Just like that!"

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Chapter 349 - 349 Sacrificial Square

349 Sacrificial Square

His friends had vanished? Lumian, clutching a white candle, watched as the young man dashed over, his eyebrows twitching slightly.

He wasn't a tomb administrator, nor did he have an angel sealed within him!

Any anomaly that occurred meant that something was wrong!

"Stop!" Lumian drew his revolver with his free right hand and pointed it at the black-haired, brown-eyed, and pale-faced young man.

In the flickering candlelight, the lad shook his head frantically and said, "Help! Save me! They've all vanished!"

He slowed down slightly but didn't stop.

Bang!

Lumian pulled the trigger of the revolver, sending the yellow bullet grazing the lad's body into the distance, disappearing into the darkness that couldn't be illuminated by candlelight.

Sensing Lumian's determination to stop him, the lad finally halted and revealed a pleading expression.

"Save me! Save me!"

Observing Hela's silence with no intention of making conversation, Lumian had no choice but to inquire, "What happened?"

As he spoke, he used the yellow candle flames in the trio's hands to survey the environment on the third level of the catacombs.

Unlike the first two levels of the tomb, which were surrounded by white bones and had corpses lining both sides of the path, this level had a small square devoid of corpses.

The square was paved with mottled cobblestones, with no moss or soil in the crevices. It was unbelievably clean.

Two grayish-white pillars made of boulders stood on either side of it. Their surfaces were severely weathered, leaving peeling marks.

Even so, Lumian, with his keen eyesight, discerned the Sun Sacred Emblem and Triangular Sacred Emblem engraved on the two pillars. Surrounding them were symbols like Sun Flowers, crankshafts, and connecting rods.

Around the square, where candlelight couldn't penetrate, the darkness was dense, as if countless figures stood there, casting gazes that made Lumian's skin prickle.

The young man with black hair, brown eyes, and a pale face replied fearfully,

"I don't know. We were just about to leave the square where the altars of the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery stand to explore the ancient tomb on the third level. Suddenly, they stumbled over something and fell, one by one. Even the candles in their hands fell to the ground and went out.

"I-I was at the back and saw them vanish just like that!"

To him, the most pressing question wasn't how they vanished but why the witness still remembered their disappearance.

It's clear that if you aren't affected by the strangeness and manage to escape, your faith in the Eternal Blazing Sun would surge… Lumian couldn't discern anything amiss with the other party, so he casually posed another question.

"Are you college students?"

The lad nodded again.

"Yes, we're students from Trier Normal College. We formed a team to adventure here. My—my name is Gérard."

Lumian couldn't help but chuckle. He even considered inviting Gérard to join him and Hela in their search for the Samaritan Women's Spring. After all, the chances of a student like him surviving until graduation seemed slim. He might be more useful as bait.

As he contemplated how to determine if there was anything wrong with Gérard, Hela suddenly spoke with a cold tone, "We'll escort you back."

Surprisingly kind? Lumian turned to Hela, taken aback.

His impression of this lady was that even her blood ran cold.

Gérard was so grateful that tears and snot streamed down his face. He continued to thank them profusely as he approached.

Lumian observed his every move. He retrieved a white candle from his canvas bag and tossed it over.

Desperately, Gérard caught it and lit the new candle with the old one, which had only a small segment left.

Seeing the flickering candlelight, the college student breathed a sigh of relief and followed Hela and Lumian down the stone staircase leading to the second level.

Just as he took ten steps up, Gérard was suddenly stunned.

Lumian looked over and noticed that the lingering fear on his face had disappeared.

“Will it be a problem for you to return to the surface by yourself?” Hela asked again, but her words were entirely different from before.

Gérard chuckled.

“No problem. Thank you for the candle. Sigh, losing the spare candle is troublesome.”

Uh… Lumian’s heart stirred as he probed, “Did you venture to the third level of the tomb alone?”

Gérard nodded proudly. “Of course, I possess enough courage and experience.”

He has finally forgotten about his schoolmates… Did he not forget because he was at the sacrificial square? Did Madame Hela notice that, thereby suggesting escorting him? Lumian nodded in enlightenment.

After watching Gérard ascend the stairs and leave through the entrance of the Old Ossuary, Lumian and Hela returned to the sacrificial square.

This time, when Lumian looked at the two sacrificial pillars representing the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery, his feelings for them were entirely different.

However, even with the deity’s gaze and protection, the two stone pillars inevitably showed signs of weathering and corrosion after countless years in the depths of the catacombs.

Lumian believed that more protection meant greater confidence. He wouldn’t lose anything by giving it a try. Facing the sacrificial pillar engraved with the Sun Sacred Emblem, he raised his body slightly and spread his arms.

“Praise the Sun!”

Hela watched silently, not interrupting his prayer.

After Lumian finished his concise praise, the two of them made their way toward the Krismona Night Pillar to the north, following the black line above their heads and the road sign at the edge of the square.

Lumian, holding a white candle, had only taken a few steps away from the sacrificial square when his heart stirred. He cast his gaze forward.

At some point, a skeleton, covered in dark-green mold, had collapsed by the road. The bones of its hands lay across the road, as if it wanted to grab a passerby's ankle.

If Lumian had walked faster and failed to carefully observe the environment, he might have tripped over the corpse!

This instantly reminded him of Gérard's description: The college student's companions stumbled over something and fell to the ground, extinguishing their candles. Only then were they "swallowed" by the catacombs, leaving no trace of their existence!

Did they trip over these fallen bones? Lumian thoughtfully kicked the hand bone away.

Amidst the clanking sounds, he and Hela continued forward. However, after a few steps, they encountered another white skeleton with half its body lying on the road.

Lumian frowned and instinctively looked back at the spot where he had almost tripped.

The dim candlelight barely reached there, but Lumian could barely make out the details with his Hunter's eyesight.

His pupils dilated as he realized that the pale-white hand bone he had kicked had returned to its original position, still serving as an obstacle for passersby!

"They're still alive? Undead creatures?" Lumian asked, his nerves on edge.

"No, but it's a possibility," Hela replied succinctly.

Seeing Lumian's puzzled expression, she explained, "They must have been affected by the environment deep within the tomb and are exhibiting certain abnormalities. When the hidden dangers and horrors in the environment erupt, it's likely that they will all turn into undead creatures."

All of them turning into undead creatures… Lumian instinctively shuddered as he imagined such a scenario.

Whether complete or incomplete, there were at least a million skeletons on this level. It might even be an order of magnitude more. If they all became undead creatures with a hatred for the living, the situation would be terrifying to the extreme!

Seeing that Hela had no intention of turning back, Lumian followed. They relied on the guidance of the road sign and the black lines above their heads to navigate through the bones that were trying to obstruct them and slowly made their way toward their destination.

After an unknown amount of time, they finally reached the Krismona Night Pillar without encountering another living person.

It was a colossal pillar made of black marble, its upper end reaching the cave ceiling. There were no patterns or symbols engraved on its surface, nor were there any signs of weathering or corrosion.

Lumian was taken aback.

In the sacrificial square, the two stone pillars symbolizing the Eternal Blazing Sun and the God of Steam and Machinery had been weathered and corroded!

Is this pillar more special than the sacrificial ones?

As if sensing Lumian's thoughts, Hela spoke coldly, "Krismona is a member of the Demoness Sect, which can also be called the Demoness family.

"She was a Sequence 2 Demoness of Catastrophe. She perished in the War of the Four Emperors in the previous epoch, dying inside Fourth Epoch Trier. However, her characteristics were retrieved by the Demoness family.

"Apart from the Krismona Night Pillar, there are also the Marianne Night Pillar and Lius Night Pillar on the third or fourth level."

"Who are these two?" Lumian believed they were angels as well. Otherwise, they wouldn't be on par with Krismona.

"Marianne was the pope of the Church of Evernight back then, and Lius was a Blessed of ancient Death, a Death Consul. Their characteristics were also retrieved by their respective factions. As for whether other angels perished here, I'm not sure, but many of the angels who followed the Blood Emperor must have perished." After Hela briefly explained, she pointed at the stone staircase behind the Krismona Night Pillar. "Let's go to the fourth level."

Lumian tersely agreed, and they quickly replaced their rapidly burning white candles before ascending to the fourth level.

…

After attending the mysticism gathering, Franca and Jenna retraced their steps to the underground area corresponding to the arcade of the opera house.

As they turned a corner at a fork of the road, Franca leaned over and whispered into Jenna's ear,

"Someone's following us."

Someone is following us? Jenna's heart skipped a beat.

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Chapter 350 - 350 Negative Effects

350 Negative Effects

“How can that be?” Jenna exclaimed, her surprise and confusion evident.

She recollected the mysticism gathering’s conclusion, where participants dispersed through various routes at sporadic intervals. The two of them had been cautious, ensuring they left no clues. So, how had they been followed?

Observing Jenna’s restraint from looking back, Franca calmly moved ahead and whispered,

“Who knows? Perhaps another participant chose this route and stumbled upon someone ahead. They might want to tail us, hoping for an opportunity to strike it big. Or maybe someone with unusual skills tracked us in an unexpected way.

“Let’s keep moving forward as if nothing’s amiss. We’ll be safe once we reach the street under the arcade.

“If our pursuer strikes before then, drop the carbide lamp immediately and hide in the nearby shadows. Depending on the situation, you can decide how to join the fight.”

Jenna nodded subtly, indicating her willingness to follow Franca’s instructions.

Unintentionally, she tightened her grip on the carbide lamp.

After traversing the dark, damp tunnel for a hundred to two hundred meters, Franca slowed down and glanced back with confusion.

“The stalker has vanished…

“It’s also possible that he found a way to bypass the spider silk I left behind…”

As she finished speaking, a figure emerged from the darkness ahead, illuminated by the carbide lamp’s glow.

Jenna reacted swiftly, dropping the carbide lamp in her left hand and blending into the shadows.

Relying on her Mirror Substitution technique, Franca didn’t rush to evade. Instead, she fixed her gaze on the stalker who had circled around to confront them.

It was the man masquerading as a Warlock, his face concealed beneath a hooded shadow.

The entrustee!

He gazed at Franca and deliberately spoke in a high-pitched voice, “I want to strike a deal with you guys.”

…

Behind the Krismona Night Pillar, Lumian trailed behind Hela, clutching a new white candle that flickered in the dim light. They followed the worn stone steps, seemingly descending into the depths of hell.

The stone walls on either side slowly gave way, revealing intricate reliefs of human heads. Dark gray figures clustered together, reminiscent of the countless bones piled high in the upper tomb.

As Lumian completed the descent and stepped onto the hushed fourth level of the catacombs, an overwhelming restlessness overcame him. It was as if he had been imprisoned for a long time, yearning for freedom.

This sensation wasn’t unfamiliar; it was a side effect of the Armored Shadow contract, but it had never been this intense before!

It was as if his spirit felt trapped within his body, finally becoming cognizant of the truth.

It sought to break free from this “cage,” to shatter this world and gain true freedom.

Phew… Lumian exhaled slowly, calming himself down.

Even without the Alms Monk boon, he believed he could manage these turbulent emotions. With the Alms Monk’s power, he could control them even better.

According to Madam Justice, the higher one’s Sequence, the more susceptible they are to madness and the hidden corruption of the fourth level of the catacombs. Is that what I’m experiencing? Is it because my Sequence isn’t high that I could endure and control it? Lumian quickly made a guess about the current situation. He instinctively looked up and cast his gaze diagonally at Hela.

Her neck is slender, mostly concealed in the widow-like attire’s collar, a suitable target for snapping…

Just as this thought crossed Lumian’s mind, he hurriedly shook his head, dismissing the negative effects of the Abscessed Hand’s contract.

Simultaneously, he noticed that Hela’s face had turned pale-whiter, resembling a corpse that had been dead for many days rather than a living human.

In an instant, Hela produced a military flask, unscrewed the cap, and downed its contents.

Lumian caught a whiff of the strong scent of alcohol.

Silently, he muttered, It should be liquor… Could Hela be like the alcoholics in Feysac, carrying multiple flasks with her?

After finishing a third of the bottle in a single gulp, Hela's complexion flushed slightly as she inquired, "Which way should we go?"

Lumian responded honestly, "It's in an ancient tomb on the westernmost side. We have a general idea of the area, but not the exact location."

Hela nodded and glanced at the top of the tomb, where a thick black line was drawn with arrows pointing in various directions.

Combining this with the signs near the entrance, Lumian could roughly discern the route leading west.

Nevertheless, he pulled out a compass he had prepared beforehand to confirm.

Under the feeble candlelight, the compass needle oscillated continuously, erratic and unceasing.

"It's acting crazy," Lumian commented, attempting to alleviate his pent-up irritation with humor.

"We'll have to rely on the road signs and black lines," Hela responded, seemingly expecting this.

Lumian sighed, eyeing the erratically moving compass. He chuckled self-deprecatingly.

"If it never stops, could it power a perpetual motion machine?"

Hela glanced at him.

"Aren't you a believer in the Eternal Blazing Sun?"

Lumian replied sincerely, "At least for now, I am."

Hela didn't press the topic further. Following the road sign beside her and the black lines above, she stepped to the right.

"The Marianne Night Pillar and Lius Night Pillar are both on this floor. There's also Fran?ois's Tomb, the Blood Order Hall, and Crazy Shrooms Cave… Uh, the style of this name is completely different from the others," Lumian rambled, diverting his attention from the road sign.

The most noticeable difference between the fourth and third levels was the absence of corpses lining the path. It appeared wider and cleaner, yet it was eerie in its silence.

The ancient tombs had sealed entrances, concealing their contents from prying eyes.

Without turning around, Hela remarked, “Does your mental unrest manifest in talking and rambling more?”

“Not exactly. Talking just helps me cope with the irritation,” Lumian admitted.

They continued to navigate, using the road signs and black lines to adjust their direction as they went along.

As Lumian passed by the partially natural tomb cave named the Order Hall, the outer soil tinged with a hint of blood, he suddenly spotted someone.

It was a woman in a plain white robe, her black hair flowing down her back, and her features extraordinarily exquisite, perfectly harmonious. Her aura was so pure that she seemed out of place in this silent and filthy tomb.

Despite having seen a Demoness of Pleasure frequently, Lumian couldn’t help but be amazed. He even felt an unholy urge to ravage her.

This wasn’t just a drawback of Flog’s boxing gloves; it was a dark impulse from the depths of his heart.

Lumian snapped out of it. The woman had sparkling blue eyes, cold and lifeless, and her hands were empty, holding an unlit white candle!

In the catacombs, the living would vanish without the protection of the white candle’s flames!

Lumian’s body tensed as the woman slipped into the surrounding darkness, blocked by the outer wall of the Blood Order Hall, and disappeared without a trace.

“What are you looking at?” Hela’s cold voice cut through the silence.

“Didn’t you see?” Lumian recounted the scene he had witnessed in detail.

Hela fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “I didn’t see it indeed. However, as soon as you stopped moving, I cast my gaze in that direction.”

“Was I the only one who could see it? Or was I the only one allowed to see it?” Lumian couldn’t be certain if it was due to Termiboros’s influence, his Sequence, or his gender.

Hela pondered for a moment and replied, “Don’t concern yourself with such matters. It’s normal for special wraiths and evil spirits to linger in the depths of the catacombs, but this place is like a powerful seal. As long as you don’t break the rules and trigger an anomaly, you should be safe.”

Lumian nodded.

“I was just thinking,” Lumian began, “Ordinary tourists and adventurous college students wouldn’t be able to pass through the third level of the tomb to reach this place. Why did they produce the guiding black line and accurate road signs? Who are they for?”

Hela answered as she took another step forward, “Official Beyonders who come here regularly to clean up and tomb administrators who patrol the area every day.”

She then offered a simple reminder. “Based on your description, the female figure you saw earlier resembles a high-ranking Demoness.”

Lumian’s heart skipped a beat.

“Could it be the lingering vengeful spirit of the Demoness of Catastrophe, Krismona?”

“I’m not sure,” Hela replied, taking another sip from her military flask.

Lumian casually glanced around, his eyelids twitching.

He noticed a purplish-red patch on the back of Hela’s right hand.

It hadn’t been there before.

It resembled the livor mortis seen on the deceased!

Is this the effect of the corruption on the fourth level of the catacombs? Is Madame Hela using alcohol to resist it? Lumian continued his small talk.

Amidst his babbling, they meandered through the unmarked ancient tombs and eventually reached the westernmost area of the floor.

At the edge of the rock wall, dozens or possibly hundreds of ancient tombs stretched out of sight.

Just as Lumian was about to ask Hela if she could expedite the search for their target, he heard knocking from an ancient tomb nearby.

Both Hela and Lumian tensed, their eyes fixed on the tomb as more of its damaged stone walls crumbled, revealing a dark cavern that humans could enter and exit.

A figure emerged, hunched over.

Lumian, filled with tension, wanted to unleash a Giant Fireball, but he restrained himself, opting to observe first.

The man who crawled out of the ancient tomb held a lit white candle, dusted off his clothes, and slowly straightened up.

Dressed in a black seer's robe commonly seen in circuses, he had brownish-black skin, a slender build, curly black hair, and deep-set eyes. A crystal-like monocle adorned his right eye. He was none other than the Islander swindler, Monette.

Monette flashed a smile at Lumian and Hela.

"What a coincidence!"

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Chapter 351 - 351 Killing Intent

351 Killing Intent

Dammit! Lumian couldn't help but curse inwardly when he saw Monette.

A mix of anger and fear washed over him, a reaction to the stress of the situation.

Why is it him again?

Why did he appear underground in front of me at such a critical moment?

What is he up to?

Why is he like the bedbugs at Auberge du Coq Doré, the cockroaches in the trash, and the rats in Underground Trier, ubiquitous and unavoidable?

"Who are you?" Hela asked coldly.

Her deadpan demeanor swiftly soothed Lumian's emotions. His mind raced as he analyzed the intentions of the Islander swindler, Monette, and the Salle de Bal Unique dance hall backing him.

Monette, with a sly smile, pinched the monocle in his right eye socket and replied,

"Like you guys, a tomb adventurer."

Tomb adventurer… You make grave robbers sound so honorable… Madam Justice once said that the higher a Sequence, the more dangerous it is to enter the catacombs… Therefore, the angel Monette believes in can't provide him with any assistance here. The saints with godhood in Salle de Bal Unique don't dare enter either… In other words, if Madame Hela and I join forces, we have a high chance of keeping Monette here forever, preventing him from roaming around like a cockroach! Lumian narrowed his eyes as he gazed at Monette.

The fear in his heart dissipated significantly, and the dangerous thoughts of using this opportunity to eliminate the swindler in front of him rapidly multiplied.

Lumian smiled and looked at Monette.

"Tomb adventurer? Do you know this place well?"

Monette smiled and said, "Of course."

He raised his right hand and pointed at an ancient tomb at the edge of the candlelight's range.

"That belongs to a member of the Fourth Epoch's Zoroast family."

Immediately after, Monette pointed to a few nearby tombs.

"That's a member of the Jacob family, a member of the Abraham family, a member of the Blood Legion…

"Unfortunately, there are no Beyonder characteristics left behind."

Lumian's surprise and puzzlement grew as he realized that the Islander swindler had genuinely answered his question. This raised even more questions about Monette's motives.

He cautiously pointed towards the ancient tomb from which Monette had emerged.

"Whose tomb is that?"

Monette took a few steps forward, noticing the subtle shift in Lumian's demeanor. He stopped and maintained his enigmatic smile.

"A member of the Fourth Epoch's Amon family."

This swindler's knowledge of the Fourth Epoch families and the catacombs' fourth level is far more extensive than what should is written on the road signs…. Amid Lumian's bewilderment, Hela spoke again.

"Then do you know where the Samaritan Women's Spring is?"

Monette stroked the outer edge of his monocle and wore a smirk.

"Why should I tell you? What kind of reward can you offer?"

"Why should we believe you have the exact location of the Samaritan Women's Spring?" Lumian asked instinctively.

He suspected that Monette was about to embark on his habitual deception.

Monette chuckled lightly.

"I really don't know. The name Samaritan Women's Spring isn't that impressive. It seems to come from an ancient book I once read. However, after coming to this level many times, I discovered some strange phenomena. Some occasionally animated bones will automatically gather in this area, enter a tomb, and never come out."

The undead animated by the environment will be affected by this tomb's abnormality and drawn to it automatically? Or is that the Samaritan Women's

Spring? Western side, some ancient tomb. The conditions match… Lumian's heart raced as he became even more vigilant.

Monette, the Islander swindler, voluntarily disclosed such crucial information without receiving any payment ?

This was completely out of character for him!

Any anomaly that occurred meant that something was wrong!

Lumian suspected two potential scenarios: either Monette was luring him and Hela into the ancient tomb where the undead gathered, hoping to lead them into a trap, or he was using them as scouts to navigate this dangerous territory.

Both possibilities were equally plausible. Although the former didn't benefit Monette, some people did enjoy seeing others suffer.

"That's all I know." Monette pinched the monocle in his right eye socket and said with a smile, "I'll search the other tombs. If you can find the so-called Samaritan Women's Spring, remember to leave a note for me in the tomb of the Amon family member; tell me what's so special about it."

As he spoke, he advanced toward Lumian.

In Lumian's tense state, poised to strike at a moment's notice, the Islander swindler sidestepped him and headed for the distant tomb, carrying a lit white candle.

Soon, his silhouette disappeared at the crossroads, plunging the area into darkness once more.

Has he truly left? Lumian remained vigilant, his attention focused on Termiboros's reaction.

The Inevitability angel remained silent, seemingly unperturbed by Monette's reappearance.

Hela took a few steps back and positioned herself beside an ancient tomb, pushing open its rickety stone door.

Confronted by the pale-white bones strewn at the tomb's entrance, Hela raised her right hand.

As if pulled by invisible threads, the bones swiftly converged, morphing into a swaying humanoid skeleton with a creaking sound.

Hela refrained from issuing any commands to the undead creature she had summoned. She observed coldly as it slowly departed from the tomb, drawn by an unseen force into the darkness.

Is Madame Hela from the Corpse Collector pathway, or does she possess a corresponding mystical item? Lumian roughly discerned Hela's intentions. She intended on utilizing the undead creatures' characteristic—the automatic attraction to the problematic ancient tomb—to chart their course.

The most probable anomaly in this region was the Samaritan Women's Spring!

Holding their burning white candles, the pair followed the humanoid skeleton through the westernmost tombs.

Suddenly, another figure emerged from the darkness around the corner, a candle flame accompanying him.

A crystal monocle adorned his right eye socket, and an enigmatic smile graced his face.

It was that Islander swindler Monette once more!

As Lumian jumped in fright, Monette asked with a smile, "Is that Samaritan Women's Spring interesting? Can I accompany you?"

Why didn't you ask previously? Lumian's killing intent surged.

Without batting an eyelid, he said, "We haven't even located it yet. How would we know if it's interesting? Why didn't you conceal yourself in the shadows, awaiting the completion of our exploration and confirmation of any dangers or traps before venturing forth? That way, the risk would be considerably lower. And even if we succeed, we won't be able to remove the Samaritan Women's Spring in its entirety."

Monette pressed the back of his right index finger against the monocle and nodded in agreement.

"You make a valid point."

The swindler grinned and retreated into the darkness around the corner.

The candle's flame promptly dwindled until it vanished.

He left so easily? Lumian's thoughts raced, but he couldn't quite decipher Monette's intentions.

He glanced at Hela and noticed that she was sipping liquor again, but her complexion had a pallid, almost bluish hue.

She resembled a corpse even more now.

"Do you have any idea what's up with these monocle-wearing folks?" Lumian inquired.

Hela placed the empty military flask back into her hidden pocket. As she continued to follow the humanoid skeleton, she replied in a cold, ethereal voice, “It’s tied to the Fourth Epoch’s Amon family.”

Fourth Epoch’s Amon family… The ancient tomb Monette emerged from belonged to a member of the Amon family… They control the Marauder pathway, much like Franca mentioned the Demoness family’s control over the Assassin pathway. Seeing that Hela wasn’t inclined to share more, Lumian had no choice but to keep silent and follow.

Monette’s reappearance pushed aside any thoughts of idle chatter to ease his restlessness.

As they proceeded, the candles held by Lumian and Hela took on a faint, eerie shade of dark green.

The “resurrected” skeleton turned into a massive, decaying tomb with a partially open stone door.

Lumian’s spirits soared, sensing that the Samaritan Women’s Spring lay ahead.

At that moment, another figure poked its head out from the side of the tomb.

Under the yellowish candlelight, the crystal monocle gleamed with an unsettling brilliance.

It was the Islander swindler, Monette, once more!

He grinned and inquired, “Do you have any messages for your family and friends? I can help convey them.”

Lumian was so startled that he almost couldn’t contain the urge to strike down Monette right then and there!

There couldn’t be a better place to deal with him!

“No,” Hela replied icily, choosing not to engage.

Lumian exhaled slowly and said, “Neither do I.”

“What a shame.” Monette returned to the dark tunnel beside the tomb, looking disappointed.

The yellowish candlelight flickered slightly, indicating that he hadn’t gone far and was waiting nearby.

Lumian couldn’t help but glance at Hela and gesture with his right hand as if cutting a throat.

He was asking if they should eliminate the Islander swindler in advance.

Hela remained silent for a few moments before gently shaking her head.

“We’ll leave as soon as we obtain the Samaritan Women’s Spring.”

She intended to stay focused on their objective and avoid stirring up further trouble.

Yes, once I’ve collected the spring water, I’ll teleport away with Madam Hela… Lumian agreed and replaced their candles with fresh ones.

After some time, the skeleton still hadn’t emerged. Cautiously, they entered the massive tomb through the partially open stone door.

At that moment, a raspy, elderly voice echoed from the depths of the tomb.

“Halt!”

Within the perimeter of the yellowish candlelight, a figure trembled into view.

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Chapter 352 - 352 Spring Source

352 Spring Source

A figure staggered out from the depths of the tomb.

As the figure entered the range of the candle flames, it seemed uncomfortable with the light. It raised its right hand to shield itself from the glare.

Similar to the tomb administrators, the figure wore a blue shirt and yellow pants. However, his face bore deep wrinkles and light-brown patches. Sparse, dry, white hair adorned his head, and his eyes were an unusual pure black, giving off an icy coldness.

For some inexplicable reason, Lumian found it challenging to discern the features of the aged tomb administrator. His form seemed to blur at the edges, blending seamlessly with the surrounding darkness, impervious to the white candle's glow. His breath was so faint it bordered on non-existent.

In a hoarse, emotionless voice, like that of a corpse capable of speech, he uttered, "Get out of here!"

"Since it's open for viewing, there shouldn't be any restricted areas!" Lumian retorted, echoing the tone of college students in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, attempting to reason with him.

But the aged tomb administrator repeated, "Get out of here!"

Lumian turned to Hela, hoping she might succeed in persuading the gravekeeper.

If that failed, he was prepared to take more direct action, either restraining the other party or even rendering him unconscious.

The Spell of Harrumph was perfectly suited for such tasks.

However, Hela shook her head slowly and began to exit the tomb.

…

Deep underground near the arcade of the opera house, Franca gazed at the entrustee and inquired, "What kind of deal?"

The Warlock-dressed man responded in a shrill tone, "I'll increase the reward to 50,000 verl d'or. Go to the Deep Valley Quarry and create a huge commotion, exposing the secret cave.

“If you’re willing, you can sign the contract now. I have a way to ensure the contract’s binding powers on both parties.”

Fifty thousand verl d’or to create an explosion capable of shattering the stone wall at the secret cave’s entrance? Why seek us out for such a straightforward task while offering a generous compensation of 50,000 verl d’or? Franca’s suspicion deepened.

With a subtle movement, Franca produced a fist-sized grayish-white cloth bag and tossed it into the shadows beside her. She assumed a guarded posture against the man across from her and as though it was inconvenient for her to find a necessary item.

“Help me find my seal.”

Seal? Jenna materialized from the shadows and caught the small coin bag, hearing the metallic clinks within.

She was baffled by Franca’s request.

Isn’t the bag supposed to be filled with coins and the Ring of Punishment?

Franca smiled at the entrustee.

“What are the specific terms of the contract?”

She sensed the possibility that the other party might manipulate the contract using Beyonder powers from the corresponding domain. Franca had a plan to attack before committing to any contract—capture him, clarify the terms, and then consider whether to sign it!

…

Baffled, Lumian followed Hela out of the tomb and asked, “What do we do now?”

“Grab my right arm,” Hela’s voice was colder than before, devoid of warmth.

Lumian roughly grasped her thoughts and quickly complied, reaching out to firmly grasp her right arm.

Almost instantly, Hela twirled the black diamond ring on her right middle finger with her left palm.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian felt a profound shift. He was no longer in the same world as the tomb entrance.

Surveying his surroundings, he noticed that everything, including the dim candlelight, had become hazy, shrouded in dense fog.

Guided by Hela, Lumian moved cautiously through the thick fog, taking one step at a time.

There was no movement in the depths of the tomb, and the two of them slowly advanced in silence.

Before long, within the limited visibility of five meters, he spotted a rotting coffin standing upright on the ground.

The aged tomb administrator lay motionless in the coffin, his eyes wide open and devoid of life.

Lumian couldn't detect any sign of breathing this time.

In this foggy state, the aged tomb administrator seemed to pay them no mind, allowing Lumian and Hela to pass by as they headed towards the end of the tomb.

There, they found a gentle downward slope leading to an unknown destination.

Hela gestured for Lumian to release his grip, and the enigmatic concealment dissipated.

Standing at the top of the slope, Lumian held a candle flame in his hand, illuminating a path lined with scattered, broken bones.

An unsettling chill emanated from the depths of his heart, stifling his emotions and desires. Yet, an unshakable anger and malice of wanting to snap someone's neck persisted, growing stronger. Lumian felt as though he was observing his own duality—a sane self contrasted with a crazed, unfamiliar self.

He couldn't help but glance at Hela, who downed a flask of liquor in one go. Her face remained pale, and purplish-red patches marred her skin, making her look as if she had been dead for some time.

"Are you alright?" Lumian remembered his primary role as a constant reminder to Hela to prevent her from being corrupted by the catacombs and undergoing any abnormalities.

Hela put away the empty flask and replied in a lifeless voice, "I'm fine for now. I've made preparations to deal with this situation. As long as I don't linger too long, I should be alright."

Lumian pressed, "How long can you stay?"

"About half an hour," Hela replied, beginning to descend the slope.

Lumian planned to grab Hela's arm and use spirit world traversal to force her out of here a few minutes in advance, regardless of what they found later.

Descending deeper, the slope became littered with more bones, gradually taking on complete and original forms. Some resembled humans, while others appeared monstrous.

The skeleton Hela had awakened earlier knelt on one knee on this slope, unable to proceed further.

As they continued, Lumian noticed a thin grayish-white fog up ahead, contracting and expanding, as if it had a life of its own.

Hela slowed her pace and regarded the fog with heightened caution.

“Is there a problem?” Lumian asked, finding the fog oddly familiar.

Hela nodded and said, “It’s very dangerous. I’ve prepared as best as I can, but I’m not certain it will work.”

As Lumian listened to Madame Hela’s response, he continued to observe the grayish-white fog.

Suddenly, he recognized it.

Isn’t this the same fog that shrouded Cordu’s ruins?

The very fog that provided protection when I prayed for boons?

In that moment, Lumian realized the true reason behind Madam Justice’s insistence that he accompany Madame Hela in the search for the Samaritan Women’s Spring.

He cautiously extended his right palm towards the grayish-white fog, and as they touched, he felt warmth in his left chest.

He knew that Mr. Fool’s seal had been activated.

He pushed forward, his right palm passing through the grayish-white fog without encountering any danger or abnormality.

With newfound confidence, he couldn’t help but think, Praise The Fool!

After a brief prayer, Lumian turned to Hela with a confident smile.

“I’ve also made the necessary preparations, and they seem effective.

“I’ll grab your arm.”

Hela didn’t inquire further about Lumian’s preparations or the information he possessed. She allowed him to grab her left arm, and together, they ventured into the grayish-white fog.

The surroundings grew even quieter, and an unusual, almost palpable aura seemed to fill the air. Before long, they heard an ethereal and faint splashing sound.

The sound of water… Lumian felt a surge of excitement and relief.

They were in the right place, and the Samaritan Women's Spring was likely nearby!

They continued to move forward, and as they did, the grayish-white fog rapidly dissipated, revealing a pond-sized spring.

Around the spring, a dark substance of an indescribable color encircled the pale-white water at its center.

In the water, wet, black seaweed-like hair floated, and a few vague figures struggled to crawl out from the depths.

A woman stood beside the spring. It was the white-robed figure Lumian had seen before, suspected to be a high-ranking Demoness.

Her face was pale-white and translucent, her eyes blank and cold. White bones were scattered around her.

Splash!

Suddenly, the pale-white spring water receded with a splash, leaving behind a pitch-black hole that seemed to defy the presence of light.

With another splash, the spring water surged from the dark hole, filling the pond-sized spring once more.

This time, it was dimmer, less pale-white, and appeared empty and dark, containing countless indescribable colors.

In an instant, the spring water blended with the surrounding grayish-white fog, restoring its original appearance when Lumian and Hela first laid eyes on it.

In this place, their memories began to blur as if they were slowly fading away.

In a hurry, Lumian reached into his pocket, intending to retrieve the metal canister he had prepared to collect the pale-white spring water.

But he touched something stone-like.

He had never put anything similar into his pocket!

Lumian retracted his right hand in surprise and saw a brown stone in his palm. The stone was riddled with potholes, each filled with dark-red speckled spots.

Earth Blood ore!

It was the Earth Blood ore he had previously lost.

When did it return? Why did it suddenly appear in my possession? This is a part of Underground Trier! As Lumian's pupils dilated in alarm, a frenzied, terrifying aura saturated with blood and rust emanated from the dark hole that had swallowed the pale-white spring water once more.

The mere presence of this aura froze Lumian and Hela simultaneously, rendering them immobile.

Beside the suspected high-ranking Demoness, a skeleton raised its palm and touched its right eye.

Simultaneously, it bared its white teeth and emitted a chilling, delighted laugh.

"You've already obtained it. How can you not give it a try?"

Around the spring, other white skeletons joined in, their mouths opening to produce the same voice: "You've already obtained it. How can you not give it a try?"

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Chapter 353 - 353 Crazy Figure

353 Crazy Figure

“You’ve already obtained it. How can you not give it a try?” The ghastly white skeletons stared at Lumian, their terrifying aura intimidating him. They laughed mockingly, their laughter exaggerated and crazed.

The dark spring water, not pale-white enough, gushed from the dark hole and filled the small “pond.”

Compared to before, there was an additional figure in the water.

The figure seemed to be engulfed in an intense inferno, almost colorless flames covering its entire body.

Despite occupying only a corner of the spring, Lumian, frozen in fear, felt it was abnormally huge, like a mountain peak.

Within the nearly intangible flames, the figure revealed long, blood-colored hair. Its sculpted face was marred by decay and pus, and its bones gleamed with a metallic luster. Its iron-black eyes seemed rusted, emitting a sinister blood-red glow.

Yellowish “magma” dripped from the figure’s body, quickly extinguished by the pale-white spring water.

As the Samaritan Women’s Spring surged again, the dense white bones that had made the sound fell silent, as if they were about to decay into mud.

Seeing the decomposing mountain-like figure, the stench of blood and rust intensified in Lumian’s nostrils. His stunned mind was tinged with a madness that yearned to destroy everything, igniting his already violent and ferocious aura.

If he hadn’t been on the brink of death, his thoughts completely stalled, he might have lost his mind and become a lunatic.

He could lose control at any moment if that happened.

In any case, he stood frozen in place, as if facing his most feared natural enemy. All he knew was to tremble, forget to resist, and forget to escape.

Splash!

The highly decayed figure, shrouded in intangible flames, entered the pitch-black cave, determined to reach the edge of the Samaritan Women's Spring. It reached out its right palm, dripping with a faint yellowish-red liquid, trying to grab Lumian, who stood there.

The spring water surged, and a faint fog gathered, preventing the figure, which appeared as massive as a mountain, from leaving the spring.

A low growl escaped the figure, and its iron-black eyes emitted a corrupting redness, capable of unsettling anyone who lay their eyes on them.

Under this influence, Lumian's mind buzzed, and he went blank. The Samaritan Women's Spring trembled violently.

Although the terrifying figure couldn't break free from the spring's constraints, it successfully blocked the spring water's retreat into the dark hole.

Simultaneously, the decayed and shadowy figures within the spring surged toward the shore, driven by the low growl.

Among them, there was a woman filled with pus exuding a serene night-like temperament, a decaying corpse adorned with a golden crown, an iron-colored skeleton sprouting greasy feathers, a figure entwined with countless shattered maggots, and a strange black entity…

The white-robed woman lingering around the Samaritan Women's Spring was instantly ensnared by the long black hair. Lumian's figure reflected in her stiff, cold blue eyes.

His body grew colder, and his thoughts went blank.

At that moment, all light suddenly vanished, and he was consumed by a most profound darkness.

Melodious singing and chanting echoed from afar, soothing the area. The blurry and shadowy figures no longer displayed the same level of madness as before, as if they had been pacified.

The terrifying palms that had clutched Lumian's feet and nearly froze his spirit and flesh retracted. The long black hair that had tugged at his body lost its vitality and fell to the ground, powerless. The figure suspected to be a high-ranking Demoness lingering around the Samaritan Women's Spring also came to a halt, as if listening to a nocturnal symphony.

Even the most terrifying and frenzied figure slowed down, its terrifying aura significantly weakening.

Lumian snapped out of his daze and instantly comprehended what had transpired.

The thief who had stolen the Earth Blood ore was none other than Monette of Salle de Bal Unique!

Monette had deliberately orchestrated a coincidental encounter with him on the fourth level of the catacombs. Using his thieving skills, he had surreptitiously returned the Earth Blood ore, enabling Lumian to bring the ore specimen to the Samaritan Women's Spring without detection, triggering this bizarre turn of events!

Lumian had never intended to take the Earth Blood ore underground, deeming it too dangerous given his current abilities. Monette's theft and return of the ore had been a passive way to provoke an encounter, the nature of which remained uncertain!

As for Monette's motives, Lumian knew he might only uncover them after this ordeal concluded.

With his thoughts racing, Lumian instinctively reached for Hela's arm, intending to activate his contract mark and escape using spirit world traversal.

In the process, he attempted to rid himself of the Earth Blood ore, hoping to distract the crazed figure with long, blood-colored hair.

However, the Earth Blood ore appeared to be affected by the abnormal environment, showing visible signs of deterioration.

Silently, it crumbled, dissolving into the air. The hidden blood stains marked Lumian's palm, corroding his skin.

Meanwhile, the flame of the white candle Hela held flickered precariously, on the brink of extinguishing. The black diamond ring on her right hand emitted a profound darkness.

After grasping her arm, Lumian realized they were both frozen in place.

This area seemed to be cut off from the spirit world, rendering escape impossible!

I can't escape… Lumian retracted his hand decisively and addressed the fiery figure, who gazed at him with madness: "Ha!"

A pale-yellow beam emanated from his mouth, striking the dark, mountain-like figure.

The figure swayed, but remained unharmed. It unleashed an intangible roar once more.

Receiving this new "command," the bizarre figures, previously calmed by the tranquil night, trembled. They extended their decaying or repulsive hands once again, clutching at Lumian's feet. The black hair, previously lying dormant, rose again.

Realizing evasion was futile, Lumian's body erupted in fiery flames.

The pale-white, pus-filled hand was the first to seize Lumian's right foot, "silencing" him as his thoughts rapidly waned.

The highly decayed hand, the iron-colored skeleton adorned with light-yellow feathers, and the form intertwined with shattered maggots fulfilled their tasks one after another. They dragged Lumian, who appeared as if in a trance with wide-open eyes, toward the Samaritan Women's Spring.

Hela found herself encircled by layers of long black hair. It pierced through the tranquility of the night, enveloping the lady, who displayed signs of decay.

Lumian stared vacantly at the rigid, decomposing countenance, at the iron-black eyes tinged with blood. He sensed an overwhelming, unadulterated madness but could summon no coherent thought.

His body grew more rigid, and purplish-red livor mortis emerged on his flesh.

He was now just a step away from the pale-white spring.

At that moment, the Samaritan Women's Spring, which had been held at bay by the colossal figure for an extended period, finally surged forward, breaking through the barrier. It swept all the figures, including the colossal one engulfed in invisible flames, back into the lightless abyss of the dark hole.

The colossal figure emitted a furious roar, but it was helpless against the relentless flow of pale-white spring water, vanishing into the depths of the abyss.

Lumian "woke up" and spotted the white-robed woman lingering nearby. He swiftly turned and sprinted toward the crest of the slope.

His plan was straightforward:

Since the abnormality stemmed from the Earth Blood ore, which had partially melded with his palm, he needed to seize this chance to escape. It was not the time to collect the remaining spring water.

As long as he could make his getaway before the pale-white spring surged again and the menacing figures resurfaced, Hela would be safer left behind. She could gather the water calmly and share it with him later.

To escape, given that teleportation had failed, his legs were his sole option now.

As Lumian ran, he readied himself for any potential setbacks.

Harnessing his Pyromaniac abilities, he steadied the flame of the white candle and retrieved the Flog boxing gloves from his bag, fitting them onto his hands.

Concurrently, he attempted to invoke The Fool's honorific name in Hermes.

“The Fool that doesn’t belong to this era…”

This inspiration was triggered by the grayish-white fog enveloping the Samaritan Women’s Spring!

Splash!

Midway through his invocation and while covering some ground, Lumian heard the sound of the spring water surging.

It was faster than he had anticipated!

The growl, steeped in the scent of blood and rust, reverberated through the surroundings.

Unaware of Lumian’s thought process, Hela’s body shuddered once more, as if she had transformed from an emotionless corpse into a frightened living being.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the colossal, invisible-flame-shrouded figure with blood-colored hair and tattered, bloodstained armor.

Lumian, too, was taken aback. He even felt an inclination to surrender and give up his resistance.

He strained to endure, unable to continue invoking the honorific name. His only recourse was to place his faith in the Flog boxing gloves.

If he could hold out just a little longer, the hidden evil gods might direct Their attention toward him because of the material of the boxing gloves, sending forth dangerous creatures to influence or assail him.

In the past, Lumian would have prayed for the impending abnormality to remain manageable. But now, he hoped that the more dangerous it became, the better!

Only by muddying the waters would a fish have a chance to escape!

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Chapter 354 - 354 Palm

354 Palm

Underground near the arcade of the opera house.

The Warlock-dressed man spoke to Franca in a shrill voice, “It’s simple. There are only three specific terms. First, you two must promise to blow up the hidden door of the secret cave in Deep Valley Quarry, creating a commotion that can attract everyone nearby. Second, I’ll pay both of you 50,000 verl d’or with an advance of 20,000. Third, you’ll face consequences if you don’t uphold your end of the bargain. This restriction applies to both parties. We can discuss the details.”

The man had no intention of deceiving the two Beyonders in the contract. Instead, he planned to use his abilities to modify the mission’s content the moment the contract was established, forcing them to infiltrate the secret cave in Deep Valley Quarry and retrieve what he wanted, along with sufficient evidence.

This entrustee had once purchased a human soul for 1,000 verl d’or using this unique ability to tamper with transaction terms. He believed he wouldn’t be disappointed this time.

As Franca conversed with the Warlock-dressed man, Jenna, hidden in the shadows, reached into the small money bag and idly stroked the gold, silver, and copper coins inside.

She was certain that there was no seal inside the money bag.

Or rather, Franca didn’t have a seal!

What does she mean? Jenna’s gaze shifted to the entrustee who had stated the terms of the contract, finding it rather peculiar.

If he wanted to strike a deal, why not apply for notarization at the mysticism gathering just now?

If he were afraid that the contents of the commission would be exposed, he could have gone to the “conversation room” and borrowed the host’s mystical item. There was no need to secretly follow us for the commission!

Something is definitely off!

Jenna understood why Franca had tossed the coin bag to her.

As soon as she realized that something was amiss, she was to immediately use the Ring of Punishment to attack the other party and take control over the situation!

Phew… Jenna exhaled slowly and put on the Ring of Punishment. Using the shadows, she closed the distance between herself and the entrustee.

Franca glanced at the shadows not illuminated by the carbide lamp and smiled at the entrustee dressed as a Warlock.

“That sounds reasonable, but I need to confirm if you’re lying and if there’s a problem with this matter.”

As she spoke, she gently tossed the carbide lamp in front of her and retrieved a mirror from the Assassin suit’s hidden pocket. She smiled and said, “Coincidentally, I’m skilled in divination.”

Upon hearing this, the entrustee dressed as a Warlock’s pupils dilated, and his entire body tensed up.

He wasn’t sure if Magic Mirror Divination could expose his scheme!

Hidden in the shadows, Jenna detected his abnormality. Without hesitation, she raised her right hand slightly, causing the iron-colored ring covered in tiny spikes to glow.

Simultaneously, two blinding bolts of lightning shot out from her eyes.

Psychic Piercing!

…

At the Samaritan Women’s Spring.

Lumian and Hela were once again gripped by a horrifying terror, consumed by pure madness. They stood frozen in place, their bodies quivering slightly.

While this madness immobilized them, it paradoxically spared them from imminent death. Their frozen bodies burned with an intense heat, and their dormant thoughts ignited with fury and brutality.

However, their purplish-red livor mortis and decaying skin continued to worsen, showing no signs of improvement.

Darkness descended once more, and Hela used the black diamond ring on her right hand to try and pacify the spectral figures hovering in the Samaritan Women’s Spring, including the burning giant in rotting armor.

Lumian recollected his thoughts and realized that his escape with Hela had not been in vain.

They had distanced themselves more than ten meters from the spring, and the decaying, shadowy figures could not leave the Samaritan Women's Spring or reach the shore to grasp their legs and drag them underwater.

These figures clustered at the spring's edge, their vacant eyes staring into nothingness. Their heavily decayed or distorted hands occasionally reached out from the water, only to be forcefully pulled back by some mysterious force.

Silently, they emitted roars that made the entire slope tremble, inducing drowsiness and feelings of submission in Lumian and Hela, causing various adverse reactions.

However, the madness that had ignited their thoughts and the strange effects that had led to signs of dissociative identity disorder had failed to take hold.

Around the Samaritan Women's Spring, only the lingering female figure and the long black hair, resembling seaweed, could approach Lumian. One gazed at him with eerie eyes, while the other extended itself, attempting to ensnare him.

Lumian was relieved. Even if his resistance failed, he would be dragged toward the Samaritan Women's Spring by the long black hair and the indistinct figure suspected to be a high-ranking Demoness. With more than ten meters to cover, he had a chance to hold on until the pale-white spring water overcame the terrifying figure with its reddening iron-black eyes and carried him back into the pitch-black abyss.

When the moment arrived, Lumian could make a swift escape. In two or three attempts, he could exit the area shrouded in the grayish-white fog and return to the chamber above.

Later, he would send Hela inside to retrieve the Samaritan Women's Spring's water, avoiding the adverse reaction caused by the blood ore and the colossal figure which was clearly more potent than the other "water ghosts."

But in the next moment, Lumian's body froze unnaturally.

White frost appeared and vanished repeatedly on his body.

In the blue eyes of the woman, Lumian was now imprisoned in ice.

The long black hair coiled tighter around him, dragging him toward the Samaritan Women's Spring.

Seeing Lumian in peril, Hela, who had remained relatively unaffected, swiftly aimed her right hand at the unknown entity, suspected to be the lingering spirit of a high-ranking Demoness, using the black diamond ring that emitted a constant darkness.

The night transformed into a shroud, enshrouding the other entity and inducing slumber.

Lumian seized this opportunity to release a harrumph, channeling a white stream of light through his nose and into the crystalline ice that bound him, targeting the seaweed-like black hair.

The black hair that ensnared him suddenly lost its strength.

Simultaneously, the curtain of night that had surrounded the entity abruptly constricted, leaving it empty.

Not far away, the female figure in the white robe reappeared, her gaze fixed on Lumian.

Though danger still loomed, Lumian felt a surge of relief. He believed that, even if he stopped resisting now, he could hold on until the pale-white spring withdrew into its depths.

At that moment, the iron-colored eyes of the colossal figure floating in the spring grew wilder, and the rust-like redness became as vivid as blood.

He tugged violently at the spring water, as if trying to break free from invisible chains.

Finally, amid a tumultuous earthquake-like upheaval, the figure draped in tattered, blood-soaked armor and engulfed in invisible flames reached the edge of the Samaritan Women's Spring.

Rumble!

The ground quaked, sending grayish-white dust raining down.

Lumian's mind buzzed, and he blacked out instantly.

When he regained his senses, he found himself back at the edge of the Samaritan Women's Spring, having covered over ten meters in an instant.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Hela rushing back towards him, her eyes vacant and bloodshot, resembling a puppet or a mindless soldier following orders.

Lumian could already guess that when he closed his eyes, he had returned to the spring's edge in a similarly empty and obedient state.

At this moment, he couldn't flee upon regaining consciousness. Behind him were the coiling black hair and the figure of the supposed high-ranking Demoness. In front of him were the grotesque, decaying, and repulsive palms.

Simultaneously, they clawed at Lumian, intent on dragging him into the spring. The colossal figure with long, blood-red hair hanging over it was just a step away.

Gritting his teeth, Lumian seized the chance to bite the base of the white candle and reached into his pocket with his gloved left hand.

As he did, he cursed internally.

You dogsh*t evil gods have been observing me for so long. Why haven't you sent anything to harm me?

Where are the promised dangerous creatures?

Are you afraid to confront that insane figure here?

Despite his curses, Lumian didn't give up. He drew a dagger and was about to cleave off his right palm, which had been corroded by the Earth Blood ore.

If you want it, take it!

As for whether the 6 a.m. reboot each morning would cause his missing right hand to regenerate, he didn't care at this point.

At that moment, a pale-white hand emerged from the pitch-black hole at the depths of the spring, where the ground trembled and quaked.

The fingers of the hand were slender, with cracks running along its back. These cracks oozed pale-yellow feathers and decaying yellow pus. The skin on either side of the cracks was crystalline like jade, but pale and dark.

As the palm emerged, it crossed the barrier of the spring water and seized the right leg of the colossal figure.

The figure, clad in tattered, blood-stained armor and shrouded in intangible flames, swayed uncontrollably as it was pulled toward the pitch-black abyss deep within the pale-white spring water.

It struggled and resisted with all its might, but the bizarre palm's retreat remained relentless. The only response was the falling of light-yellow feathers, pus stained with blood, and skin that was no longer crystalline but highlighted with black, living blood vessels.

Countless complex symbols—pale-white, pitch-black, or dim—appeared, carrying the frenzied and terrifying figure as it rapidly shrank toward the pitch-black spring.

Lumian couldn't witness the scene, nor could he see what was happening. All he knew was that the massive figure with a decaying face, blood-red hair, and iron-black eyes was moving away from him. The terrifying hands that had grabbed him stopped moving, frozen in place.

The crazed figure growled repeatedly but couldn't break free. In the blink of an eye, most of its body had been dragged back into the depths of the spring.

Just as it was about to disappear completely, its madness materialized. Two dark-red "rust spots" shot out of its iron-black eyes and darted straight toward Lumian.

Instinctively, Lumian raised his right hand to block. The two rust marks pierced through the Flog boxing glove and into his skin, which had been corroded by the Earth Blood ore.

Splash!

The pale-white spring water receded entirely, pulling all the floating figures into the pitch-black abyss.

The vicinity of the spring fell eerily silent.

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Chapter 355 - 355 The Real Spring Water

355 The Real Spring Water

In the midst of the eerie silence, Lumian sensed an unusual heat in his right palm, as though it were ablaze.

Aside from this, nothing appeared out of the ordinary for now.

Given the circumstances, Lumian couldn't afford a detailed examination. Ignoring the cold creeping through his body and his "calmed" thoughts, he retreated to assess the situation at the Samaritan Women's Spring.

Indistinct figures and the long, weed-like black hair submerged in the water were drawn into a lightless abyss, swaying relentlessly, as though a fierce battle raged within.

The white-robed, corpse-like figure that had lingered nearby had vanished into thin air, leading Lumian to suspect that his encounter with the suspected high-level Demoness on the fourth floor was linked to a similar change in the Samaritan Women's Spring.

This sight sparked a daring idea in Lumian's mind.

Seeing the terrifying figure pulled back to the fountain by a strange power, one in fierce resistance and the other trying to suppress it, it seemed unlikely a victor would emerge quickly. Lumian decided to stay vigilant, pause his escape, and explore the possibility of setting a trap while collecting some of the pale-white spring water once it surged again.

The "water ghosts" were nowhere to be seen at the spring's bottom, nor were there any blurry figures lingering nearby. It appeared to be a safe moment.

In the next instant, Lumian noticed Hela producing a golden bottle adorned with intricate, mystical symbols, reminiscent of the symbols he had seen at the basement door of the Highland Mystic Potion shop.

Hela didn't wait for the pale-white spring water to rise again. She squatted down and pressed the bottle's opening to the damp soil at the spring's edge.

The soil was dark-colored, and the closer they got to the pitch-black hole, the more it seemed to contain countless colors. The soil was more ordinary the farther it was from it. It was no different from the slope itself in areas where hadn't been

submerged by the spring water.

The soil, dark and filled with countless colors near the pitch-black hole, dried up as the pale-white spring water receded into the abyss. However, the periphery remained slightly moist, producing droplets that were more tangible than the pale-white spring water and resembled the color of a nocturnal lake.

Seeing that Hela's target was the liquid, Lumian asked in confusion, "Aren't you going to wait for the Samaritan Women's Spring to resurface?"

Hela shook her head.

"This is the true Samaritan Women's Spring Water. The pale-white water is too dangerous to touch right now. Contact with it means instant death, wandering forever near the spring or its source. Our containers are no exception."

That terrifying? Could it be that the Samaritan Women's Spring is a byproduct of the pale-white water and not its true form? Lumian took out a metal canister he had prepared in advance and held it to the droplets seeping from the soil at the spring's edge.

With just one drop, the canister showed signs of rust and decay from prolonged submersion.

Without a word, Hela produced a golden canister engraved with intricate symbols and tossed it to Lumian.

Only then did Lumian manage to collect the Samaritan Women's Spring. His attention remained focused on the dark spring.

As long as the earth-shaking tremors ceased, he planned to make a hasty retreat with the Samaritan Women's Spring water he had collected.

Lumian watched the sluggish progress, concerned that the pale-white spring water might surge again.

Hence, he silently cursed to relieve his pent-up emotions.

Drip, drip. He had only filled a third of the bottle when Hela decided to stop and seal the golden canister.

I mustn't be greedy… Lumian warned himself, putting an end to the collection of Samaritan Women's Spring with Hela.

Together, they sprinted toward the summit of the slope.

Before long, the sound of water echoed from behind them.

Once more, the pale-white spring gushed forth from the pitch-black hole!

Without looking back to assess the situation, they continued their sprint through the grayish-white fog, as if a relentless, intangible monster pursued them.

In a matter of seconds, they finally reached the fog's edge. Lumian grabbed Hela's arm and propelled himself forward.

Exiting the shroud of grayish-white fog, Lumian finally breathed a sigh of relief. The coldness in his body abated, and his thoughts settled significantly.

…

Psychic Piercing!

Jenna emerged from the shadows, her eyes crackling with lightning.

The man in the Warlock robe heard a surreal crack and felt an intense surge of pain radiate from the depths of his Spirit Body, gripping his mind.

Instinctively, he crumpled to the ground, curling up in an attempt to alleviate the agony.

Franca wasted no time and seized the moment. She pointed the mirror she held at him.

As the Warlock-clad entrustee appeared in the mirror, black flames ignited in Franca's palm and spread across the glass.

Demoness's Curse!

Black flames erupted from the man's body, weakening his struggling spirit.

Soon after, crystalline ice encased him layer by layer, and colorless spider silk cocooned him, revealing his form.

Franca's intention was to restrain him, not kill him. After all, nobody knew if he was involved in any corruption or high-level matters, and reckless spirit channeling could lead to accidents.

Seeing the man weakened and heavily restrained, Franca whispered in surprise,

"That's it?"

In the next moment, the man struggled to speak under the threefold control of black flames, ice, and spider silk, his voice faint but determined. "You're committing a crime!"

As soon as he finished speaking, a violent tremor emanated from deep underground. A rock from the tunnel's ceiling plummeted toward Jenna's head.

Jenna swiftly rolled to dodge, but she still felt the impact of falling debris.

Franca faced a similar predicament. She sensed that if this continued, the entire tunnel might collapse. Even with Mirror Substitution, she couldn't guarantee her safety in this segment of the tunnel.

Without hesitation, she clenched her right hand, reigniting the remaining black flames within the entrustee's body.

Black flames engulfed his Spirit Body, and the Warlock-dressed man quickly met his end.

The tunnel's tremors ceased, leaving nothing but dust hanging in the air.

Franca breathed a sigh of relief and wasted no time. She swiftly set up a spirit channeling ritual, while Jenna kept a vigilant eye out for any passersby while kneading her shoulders and back.

After a while, Franca completed the Magic Mirror Spirit Channeling Spell. Holding the mirror, she gazed at the pale-white face with a hint of arrogance and inquired, "How much do you know about the secrets of the Deep Valley Quarry?"

The man's spirit responded in a daze, "Some seek to use machinery to prolong their lives, while others seek machinery to acquire life.

"A portion of the Deep Valley Cloister is sliding into the abyss."

Can't you be more specific? Franca pressed, "Which organization are you from? Why are you exploiting the gatekeeper's disappearance?"

Just as the man was about to respond, an ever-changing fog suddenly enveloped the mirror.

Crack!

The mirror in Franca's hand shattered instantly.

Bang!

The man's body, encased in ice and spider silk, exploded. His flesh disintegrated into mist that filled the surroundings.

Almost simultaneously, Franca shattered like a mirror, breaking into fragments that fell to the ground.

Her figure quickly outlined at the tunnel's intersection and appeared beside Jenna.

"As expected, something was amiss," Franca said solemnly, watching as the indeterminate blood mist gradually settled and melded with the ground.

By that point, the corpse had transformed into a pile of minced meat, with only the metal items on it remaining intact.

Franca and Jenna conducted a simple search and found a brass key and coins worth 200 to 300 verl d'or.

They didn't dare linger. After erasing any traces of their presence, they made their exit.

Approximately two to three minutes later, a pair of legs clad in knee-length brown boots materialized beside the puddle of flesh and blood, clutching a shrunken, golden kettle with a protruding wick.

…

The scorching sunlight bathed the entrance to the catacombs of Place du Purgatoire, and Lumian felt as though he had returned from the kingdom of the dead to the world of the living. The chill that had permeated his body gradually dissipated.

Turning to Hela, whose pale-white complexion, purplish-red livor mortis, and signs of decay had yet to fully heal, he smiled and remarked, "Even though it wasn't a real battle, it's the closest I've come to death."

Hela replied simply, "Those who can retain a mark in the pale-white spring water for a long time were once formidable individuals."

As Lumian strolled to the edge of the square, he casually inquired, "What's the purpose of the Samaritan Women's Spring? You can't actually use it to forget the past and pain, can you?"

Hela shook her head.

"For me, it can serve as a replacement for a certain ritual, or rather, become the central element of another ritual."

Lumian didn't fully grasp the concept, so he didn't press for more details.

Soon, however, he noticed that the residual chill in his body and thoughts hadn't completely vanished just because he had left the catacombs.

While it had mostly dissipated, it seemed to linger within him, resurfacing gradually as night fell.

"The abnormality in our bodies is still present," Lumian reminded Hela with a solemn tone.

Hela nodded.

"I have a solution. The one who tasked you with obtaining the spring water should have a solution as well."

Lumian acknowledged her words briefly and bid farewell to Hela, making his way toward the public carriage stop.

Compared to the abnormality of gradually dying, he was more concerned about the Earth Blood ore that had corroded his palm, as well as the bizarre “rust.”

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Chapter 356 - 356 Scar

356 Scar

As time ticked away, Lumian sensed his body temperature slowly dissipating. Even the blazing sun outside the public carriage window couldn't stave off this change.

His thoughts dulled, and the skin on the back of his hand turned a pallid white.

At last, Lumian made it to the market district.

As he disembarked from the public carriage, his limbs seemed to stiffen.

Just as he turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches, a man who approached him was taken aback. He let out a quiet gasp, his eyes filled with fear.

Lumian instinctively glanced to the side, assessing his reflection in the café's glass window.

His blonde-black hair appeared as if it hadn't been washed for days, and his face had turned a sickly shade of pale blue. There were purplish-red patches and signs of decay on his neck, and his eyes mirrored the cold emptiness of a corpse that had lain dead for many days.

Lumian smirked at the man and remarked, "Well, what do you think? Have I convincingly transformed into a zombie?"

He noticed his voice adopting a colder tone, reminiscent of Hela.

The gentleman silently cursed and bypassed the fellow who appeared ready to attend a masquerade ball.

Lumian knew the corruption consuming him was worsening. He quickened his pace and reached the safe house he hadn't yet turned over.

Swiftly, he arranged the altar, unfolded a piece of paper, and penned a brief letter to Madam Magician.

"I've fulfilled Madam Justice's mission and acquired the spring water of Samaritan Women's Spring, but I'm also succumbing to corruption. It's worsening. How can I eradicate it?"

After neatly folding the letter, Lumian summoned Madam Magician's messenger.

The “doll” messenger materialized above the blue candle flame and gave Lumian an approving nod.

“I’m quite fond of your current demeanor, though your hair is too greasy.”

The aura of near-death? Lumian’s urge to mutter was weaker than before.

After watching the “doll” messenger depart, he set a fifteen-minute time limit. If Madam Magician didn’t respond by then, he’d have to explore other avenues to rid himself of the corruption. One possibility was to perform a ritual and beseech Mr. Fool.

Tick, tock. The needle on the pocket watch borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise maintained a steady rhythm. However, Lumian had previously noticed that it was nearly ten minutes slow. It was as if the closer he came to the Samaritan Women’s Spring, the slower it ticked.

Suddenly, starlight materialized from the void, forming a mysterious and ethereal door.

The door swung open, and Madam Magician emerged, dressed in a brownish-yellow gown. Beyond the door, there was a profound darkness adorned with starlight.

The Tarot Club’s Major Arcana card holder glanced at Lumian and gave a gentle nod.

“Pray to Mr. Fool for an angel’s purification.”

I’ll still have to pray to Mr. Fool? Lumian didn’t probe further. He proceeded with the ritual at the prepared altar.

He lit the candles in the correct sequence and let the extract drip. After burning the herbs, he stepped back, gazing at the candle flames, and intoned in a deep voice, “The Fool that doesn’t belong to this era, the mysterious ruler above the gray fog; the King of Yellow and Black who wields good luck…

“I implore you,

“I implore you to cleanse the corruption within me…”

Once the ritual concluded, Lumian once again saw an angel formed from light, surrounded by twelve pairs of luminous wings.

With only his peripheral vision remaining, he felt the chill in his body dissipate, and his body temperature quickly returned to normal.

Before long, the angel departed. Lumian looked at the full-length mirror in the room and realized that his complexion, hair, and eyes had completely returned to normal. The purplish-red livor mortis had vanished entirely. Only a few traces of

decay remained, but there were no signs of deterioration. It seemed that these remnants would heal with time.

Lumian expressed heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Fool and concluded the ritual.

As he turned to Madam Magician, a sudden recollection struck him, and he hastily raised his right hand to inspect his palm.

The wound from the corrosion of the Earth Blood ore was still there. Though it was no longer as vividly red as when it first fused with the "rust," it hadn't faded either. It appeared as if he had marked his palm with a few scars using blood.

Sensing a faint undercurrent of madness and violence emanating from his right palm, Lumian furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Can't this be cleansed?"

Madam Magician fixed her gaze on his right palm for a few moments but didn't provide a direct answer. Instead, she spoke, "Share the details with me."

She took the initiative to pull up a chair and sat down, showing no inclination to continue the conversation standing.

Lumian settled into a chair at the wooden table, beginning with Madam Justice's assignment and recounting how he and Hela had each extracted a third of a canister's worth of Samaritan Women's Spring water.

He narrated the encounter with the colossal, frenzied figure and the bizarre power. Simultaneously, he didn't omit any details about Monette's appearance and actions, as well as the curious "return" of the Earth Blood ore.

Madam Magician listened to Lumian's account in silence before letting out a chuckle.

"It's quite challenging for truly formidable figures to die completely. Even without Beyonder characteristics, bodies, or souls, they often leave behind mental imprints, death marks, residual auras, and other remnants. When the right conditions align, they may find a way back into the real world with a suitable vessel."

"Like the Oldest One, the Creator?" Lumian grasped the gist of Madam Magician's explanation and inquired further, "So, who is this figure?"

Madam Magician took a moment to reflect and replied, "It's likely the Blood Emperor of the Fourth Epoch, Alista Tudor."

"The Blood Emperor? One of the Four Emperors?" Lumian had heard this title and name mentioned by Gardner Martin.

Alista Tudor's empire once spanned what was present-day Intis. The Trier, submerged underground, had served as His capital.

According to Gardner Martin, the Blood Emperor was a true deity who grasped the Hunter pathway, signifying that He was a Sequence 0 Red Priest!

"That's correct," Madam Magician affirmed. "The War of the Four Emperors was a genuine conflict among gods. Alista Tudor met His end in the submerged Fourth Epoch Trier, which also caused the capital to sink underground. He had long descended into madness and committed numerous atrocities. Rumor has it that He nearly entombed all the deities who participated in the war alongside Him. Even now, many remnants of that war lie buried beneath Trier, profoundly shaping some aspects of the Fifth Epoch's history."

The Fifth Epoch, the epoch in which Lumian and his companions resided, was often referred to as the Iron Age.

Nearly burying all the deities who participated in the war? The Blood Emperor was truly deranged… Lumian mused, genuinely intrigued.

"What occurred during the War of the Four Emperors?"

"I'm not entirely certain either," Madam Magician admitted with a shrug. "I've only heard about it from two beings who personally witnessed the war. Even They don't possess the full picture. After all, one should not look directly at a god. Remember, never look directly at a god, even if it's an incomplete Mythical Creature transformed from a Sequence 4 saint."

Beings who had personally experienced the War of the Four Emperors and still survived to this day? To have participated in such a divine conflict, they must be at least angels… Could they be the two angels beside Mr. Fool's throne? Yes, the Holy Bible mentioned that Mr. Fool's Angel of Time was an ancient angel, and one of them could be this figure? Lumian pieced together the information he had and ventured a guess.

Having heard Aurore mention the concept of Mythical Creatures and their associated complexities, Lumian had no doubt about the admonition "never look directly at a god."

Eagerly, Lumian asked, "So, after the Blood Emperor's demise, His mental mark, death mark, or residual aura remained sealed within the Samaritan Women's Spring?"

"That would likely be a death mark, but I suspect it's intertwined with a mental mark, residual aura, and even some lingering spirits left behind for reasons unknown. Otherwise, Blood Emperor Alista Tudor wouldn't persist in a combative state within the spring. Heh heh, combat can indeed be considered a Hunter trait," Madam Magician speculated.

As Madam Magician spoke, she extended her hand into the void, disappearing from Lumian's sight.

After a brief search, she reappeared, holding a tempting glass of Kirsch.

“Didn’t your sister teach you? When you have a guest, remember to ask if they want tea or wine, or perhaps offer snacks,” Madam Magician chided playfully as she took a sip of the light red wine and shook her head.

How could I remember at a time like this? Where did she get her wine? Only then did Lumian realize that he had forgotten to ask about the most important thing.

He sincerely acknowledged the lesson and then raised another query.

“What’s the origins of the strange power that dragged the Blood Emperor back into the spring?”

“I don’t know,” Madam Magician replied candidly. “Even a true god might not know. All I can be certain of is that it has no connection to the War of the Four Emperors.”

Lumian decided to put this matter aside for now and turned his attention to his right hand, where the mysterious traces remained.

“What are these marks? Can’t Mr. Fool cleanse them?”

“If this isn’t corruption, it can’t be cleansed,” Madam Magician explained while sipping her Kirsch. “It’s more similar to a mystical item embedded in your hand. It will bring about certain adverse effects, and these effects can’t be cleansed unless the item itself is removed.”

“A mystical item… What’s its purpose and what dangers does it hold?” Lumian hadn’t anticipated this revelation.

“It’s useless.” Madam Magician chuckled. “I mentioned it’s similar, but not equivalent. It certainly isn’t a direct source of power enhancement. Rumor has it that in the underground of the Fourth Epoch’s Trier, there are numerous treasures left behind by Blood Emperor Alista Tudor in various hidden locations. Only those with the Tudor family’s bloodline can unlock them. And now, you can unlock them as well.”

So, it’s like my palm contains some of Tudor’s blood and aura, unrelated to Beyonder powers? Lumian tried to probe the bright red scars on his right palm with his consciousness.

As soon as the two connected, he was abruptly engulfed by a surge of frenzied, violent, terrifying, and dominating aura. The entire room, and even the entire apartment, quaked uncontrollably.

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Chapter 357 - 357 Monette's True Identity

357 Monette's True Identity

The sudden change and the frenzied aura that had affected Lumian instinctively made him withdraw his consciousness from the scar on his right palm.

Lumian surveyed his surroundings, concerned that the aura might attract unwanted attention.

At that moment, the room fell unusually silent, and the surroundings dimmed slightly, as if a layer of dark-colored soundproof glass had been added.

Lumian relaxed and turned his gaze back to Madam Magician.

"What happened?"

"The trace carries the aura of Alista Tudor, but it has no practical effect. It can't intimidate others or make them submit." Madam Magician held a cup filled with Kirsch and smiled. "With the Niese Face, you can act as The Blood Emperor at Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons."

It could only be used for acting or to frighten people under specific situations? Lumian nodded thoughtfully.

"What kind of negative effects will these traces have on me?"

Madam Magician chuckled.

"You'll become crazier, more ferocious, and more impulsive, but you're not lacking in those qualities already."

What she meant was that you have many similar negative effects. As long as they don't exceed the limit, there wouldn't be any problems. Or rather, you are already used to it, so it couldn't get any worse.

"That's good." Lumian heaved a sigh of relief.

Madam Magician took a sip of Kirsch and reminded him, "For now, you mainly rely on your perseverance and Alms Monk endurance to suppress the negative effects and maintain your normal state. However, when the time is right, you need to vent. It's like a reservoir. You can't keep accumulating water. You have to find an opportunity to release a portion. Otherwise, if you accumulate it day by day, it

will either break the dam or spill out of the reservoir, leaving behind psychological problems."

That's true. While Alms Monk's subsequent advancement to Ascetic emphasizes endurance and accumulation, there's also an explosive aspect… Lumian understood Madam Magician's words.

Simultaneously, he thought of something.

After joining the Iron and Blood Cross Order, he would inevitably explore Underground Trier. Although he possessed the Blood Emperor's aura and had the qualifications to enter specific places and open certain treasures, would he trigger more abnormalities and encounter more danger?

Lumian expressed his concerns, and Madam Magician nodded slightly.

"This is a completely foreseeable discovery.

"Like, uh, as the saying goes, it's both a boon and a curse."

"If you don't want to take such a risk, pray to Mr. Fool again in two or three days and ask him to help you eliminate Alista Tudor's aura. Remember, you must specify that it's the aura of a high-level Beyonder of the Hunter pathway to prevent any misunderstandings of removing any unnecessary things during the surgery."

Madam Magician shook her head.

Lumian fell into deep thought, contemplating whether to retain Alista Tudor's bloodline aura or use a ritual to remove it.

Recalling that entering the underground to search for the Fourth Epoch Trier would undoubtedly be a mission assigned by the Iron and Blood Cross Order, and triggering an abnormality was highly likely, he steeled his resolve and chose to keep the bright red scar on his right palm.

Unlike other members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order who had been corrupted by the building at 13 Alista, only Alista Tudor's bloodline aura could allow him to withstand the same underground "treatment" as the corrupted without losing his sanity.

As for the potential dangers, he was concerned, but he could only choose the option with fewer disadvantages.

In any case, searching for the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier wasn't his sole mission. When the time came, many members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order would undoubtedly join the effort. Gardner Martin might even lead the team. If the sky collapsed, they would all face it together!

Seeing that Lumian had made up his mind, Madam Magician didn't say anything else and quietly savored her Kirsch.

Lumian then inquired about something else.

“That group of Monette Islander swindlers, or rather, the people at Salle de Bal Unique? Could it be that they want me to obtain Alista Tudor’s bloodline aura and open a treasure trove in the future? But why not obtain it themselves? They’ve already stolen the Earth Blood ore, and they can clearly enter the area around the Samaritan Women’s Spring.”

“Perhaps it’s too dangerous for them, and they don’t want to try it themselves. If you fail, it could unleash the Blood Emperor’s remnant spirit. If you succeed, they just have to wait until you find the treasure,” Madam Magician replied with a smile.

“Ushering in the Blood Emperor’s remnant spirit?” Lumian expressed his puzzlement. “Back then, I felt that as long as I came into contact with the pale-white spring water, I would die immediately and completely. I probably can’t become a vessel for the Blood Emperor’s resurrection.”

Madam Magician pondered for a moment and said, “Normally, that should be the case, but since you’re a Hunter and possess Mr. Fool’s seal and an angel from the Inevitability domain, once you’re dragged into the spring and fused with the Blood Emperor’s remnant spirit, it might trigger an unpredictable explosion, allowing Alista Tudor’s figure to escape its restraints and prevent death from imprisoning Him.”

Lumian pondered Madam Magician’s words and felt that the more he thought about it, the more questions arose, making him feel more terrified.

Madam Magician gently swirled her glass.

“That was just my guess. The true motives of those at Salle de Bal Unique remain to be confirmed. It might even be a prank that could endanger your life to interfere with our judgment of other matters.

“In short, you have to be vigilant. Don’t relax just because you feel that the other party has achieved their goal.”

Lumian tersely acknowledged, indicating that he wouldn’t let his guard down.

In fact, even if Madam Magician hadn’t mentioned it, he would have taken precautions against the Islander swindler who always appeared underground at critical moments.

This guy was close to traumatizing him.

“Should we report the anomaly at Salle de Bal Unique to the two Churches?” Lumian inquired.

Madam Magician wore a peculiar expression as she replied, “I’ve been observing the dance hall for some time and realized that most of the people wearing

monocles in their right eyes are normal. Only a few are problematic, and the few who are problematic are irregular. It's difficult to lock onto them as they can be one thing today and something else tomorrow.

"Furthermore, no one knows if He is among those who don't wear monocles with their right eye. To completely eliminate Him, we might have to apprehend everyone on that street and those who have visited the dance hall, either destroying or purifying them.

"However, this won't truly finish Him. It will only force Him into the shadows.

Lumian was abnormally confused. Puzzled, he asked, "What do you mean if He is among those?"

Madam Magician spoke as if the abnormal ones were the same person.

Madam Magician pondered for a few seconds and said, "He has already interacted with you several times. It's necessary for you to understand Him to a certain extent.

"He is the great noble of the Fourth Epoch's Tudor Empire, Amon. He is also the child of the Ancient Sun God, who ruled the entire world in the Third Epoch."

"He's Amon?" Lumian recalled that the Islander swindler, Monette, had crawled out of the tomb of a member of the Amon family.

The person behind him was an ancient angel!

It's no wonder he knows so much about the Fourth Epoch tombs!

Madam Magician nodded.

"He was once a King of Angels and ascended the throne of a deity, but He was defeated by Mr. Fool. Now, He is an ordinary angel.

"He belongs to the Marauder pathway. High-ranking individuals of this pathway have a special ability called Parasitism. It is the separation of a portion of themselves and parasitize the bodies of others. There are shallow levels of Parasitism and deep levels of Parasitism. The latter can allow the host to become an avatar.

"The higher the Sequence, the more targets they can parasitize."

Lumian was alarmed and afraid as he blurted out, "Island swindler Monette has been parasitized by him?"

He was actually a formidable figure who had once fought Mr. Fool!

Madam Magician agreed with Lumian's guess.

“That’s right. Every member of the Fourth Epoch Amon family is Amon. The abnormal ones in Salle de Bal Unique are also Amon. The ones who haven’t shown any abnormalities are potential Amons, or potential believers of Amon.”

Lumian was rendered speechless.

He found it fitting to describe those wearing monocles with their right eyes as bedbugs in Auberge du Coq Doré and cockroaches from the trash.

It was too similar!

Monette had, in a way, risen from his own grave.

“How many avatars does He have?” Lumian inquired after a brief pause.

Madam Magician shook her head and replied, “Since the Fourth Epoch, He has been hunting Beyonders of the Marauder pathway for ages, gathering many characteristics. No one knows how many avatars there are. What you need to remember is that when you encounter an Amon, there are already many Amon lurking around. They can be rats, bedbugs, or even smaller creatures.”

“Isn’t this perfect for monitoring others?” Lumian’s hair stood on end.

He roughly understood why Amon knew he had the Earth Blood ore and could grasp his movements. He also understood why he had felt that something was amiss when he prayed for the boon the last time—the “illusion” of someone watching him.

“What’s the approximate Sequence of Amon’s avatar?” Lumian asked with lingering fear, recalling his desire to eliminate Monette in the fourth-level tomb.

Madam Magician finished the remaining Kirsch and tossed the glass back into the void.

“He has a way to weaken His avatar, but He’s still an angel. You can’t underestimate His avatar because of this. Yes, it’s similar to a special scene on the third level of the tomb and below. You can determine and treat it according to the specific situation.”

Lumian rubbed his temples, feeling a headache brewing. Without a clear understanding of Amon’s intentions, every venture into the depths of Underground Trier was risky.

He changed the subject.

“What’s the purpose of the Samaritan Women’s Spring?”

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Chapter 358 - 358 Negligence

358 Negligence

Madam Magician chuckled.

“Why do you care? You can’t use it. You can only use it to forget all your memories and original feelings and become a new person.

“Right, in the Corpse Collector, Sleepless, and Warrior pathways, the Samaritan Women’s Spring has different uses depending on usage, ritual, and compatibility. It includes, but isn’t limited to temporarily clearing memories, healing essential damage to the spirit, improving one’s spiritual perception, becoming an ingredient for important rituals, and unlocking various abilities, among other things.”

Corresponding to the three neighboring, exchangeable pathways, Corpse Collector, Sleepless, and Warrior? Lumian extracted crucial information.

At that very moment, Madam Magician glanced at him, her smile restrained yet knowing.

“Are there any more questions?”

Lumian took a moment to contemplate before responding, “Not for now.”

Madam Magician nodded. “Then it’s my turn to ask.”

“Ask what?” Lumian was puzzled.

He had recounted all the details.

Madam Magician tapped her finger against the empty air in front of her.

“Why didn’t you inform me that Miss Justice sent you to the Samaritan Women’s Spring?”

Lumian was taken aback.

“I thought she would have informed you herself. Moreover, since she’s also a Major Arcana card holder in the Tarot Club, I didn’t see any need to confirm it with you.”

Madam Magician wore a thoughtful expression.

“Normally, there would be no issue, but this world is filled with anomalies.”

Lumian, now feeling bewildered, asked, “Is something wrong with Miss Justice?”

Madam Magician shook her head. “No, that’s not it. The problem lies in the fact that shortly after you accepted the journey to the Samaritan Women’s Spring, the Earth Blood ore went missing. I had no knowledge of your impending trip to the fourth level of the catacombs, and Miss Justice wasn’t aware that the Earth Blood ore had fallen into someone else’s hands. It’s not a matter of whether you wanted to take it with you or not.”

“If we had communicated beforehand, I could have delayed the mission to ascertain the whereabouts of the Earth Blood ore or made suitable arrangements.”

Lumian reflected on her words, realizing the truth in them.

Having foreseen that the Earth Blood ore would bring about certain encounters underground, she couldn’t ignore the hidden connection between the loss of the Earth Blood ore and the journey to the Samaritan Women’s Spring.

Lumian’s negligence, or rather, his assumption of a reasonable course of action had led to the subsequent encounters that later awaited him.

Madam Magician fixed her gaze on Lumian for a few seconds before responding, “You can’t entirely be faulted for how you handled the situation. I’m merely reminding you to exercise more caution in the future.”

She paused, her words heavy with meaning.

“This will become even more crucial when you seek the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier in the days to come.”

“Yes, Madam Magician.” Lumian accepted her guidance wholeheartedly.

After Magician disappeared with the bottle of Samaritan Women’s Spring water, Lumian swiftly tidied up the altar and settled back down.

He contemplated his errors during the operation.

Firstly, Madam Magician is right. I should have informed her about Madam Justice’s commission. Even if they had already communicated privately and there were no issues, I should still mention it. After all, my Major Arcana card holder isn’t Justice but Magician. Helping other Major Arcana card holders requires my own Major Arcana card holder’s permission.

Secondly, before entering the Samaritan Women’s Spring, I should check my condition and items for a final confirmation. Unless there’s a battle or an emergency, this should be a necessary process.

If I had remembered and completed this matter, I could have avoided many problems in advance. I wouldn’t have brought the Earth Blood ore into the Samaritan Women’s Spring area undetected. Monette, no, Amon, appeared several

times and deliberately frightened me to disrupt my thoughts and keep my attention on Him instead of my own state, causing me to neglect the Earth Blood ore's "return."

Thirdly, I didn't notice Termiboros's abnormality. He remained silent in the face of Monette's appearance, unlike His vigilance and anxiety from before. Heh, although He is sealed, He can sense His surroundings through me. As an angel, how could He not notice Amon stuffing the Earth Blood ore back into my pocket?

Furthermore, His fate is intertwined with mine. When I entered the Samaritan Women's Spring with the Earth Blood ore, my fate must have changed. How could He not have noticed? Why didn't He warn me?

Does He also want to use the special environment of the Samaritan Women's Spring and the abnormality caused by the Earth Blood ore to find a way to escape the seal? Yes, He was the one who warned me that the Earth Blood ore was special and said it would bring me a fortuitous encounter!

The strange power ultimately prevented Him from achieving His goal. Who could it be?

It's true that an evil god's angel can't be trusted completely. Termiboros has been acting so reliably recently. He reminds me from time to time not only to avoid dangers that can affect Him but also to lull me. He's waiting for an opportunity to stab me in the back.

Heh heh, you're a Hunter too?

After entering the Samaritan Women's Spring, there was no problem with my choices. The adverse effects erupted, and with all kinds of mental corruption stacked on top of each other, it was already very difficult for me to react. Regardless of right or wrong… If the corruption hadn't conflicted and hindered each other, I might have gone crazy on the spot.

Lumian reviewed the entire matter and suddenly chuckled.

"Termiboros, how did you not notice Monette stuffing the Earth Blood ore back to me?"

But Termiboros remained silent, withholding any response.

Lumian roughly ascertained the role this Inevitability angel had played in the recent events. He examined the items on his body, fearing that they would also lead him to "death."

Thankfully, the inanimate objects were relatively unaffected and suffered no substantial damage. As for the "rust" that the Flog boxing glove encountered, it wasn't a true attack. Apart from leaving some traces, it didn't affect its usage.

As for the gazes and dangerous creatures that wearing the boxing gloves would bring, Lumian didn't have any thoughts. He believed that the special environment

of the Samaritan Women's Spring limited the corresponding negative effects.

After doing this, Lumian surveyed the surroundings. He felt an indescribable fear and disgust for the safe house that Amon had once entered. He felt as if there were eyes hidden in the surrounding air.

Of course, this was mainly psychological. After all, Madam Magician had already visited.

After dismantling the hidden traps in the safe house, Lumian opened the door and left with all his belongings. He planned to never return, preferring to waste the rent.

…

In Trier, in a verdant park.

Magician, adorned in a brownish-yellow dress, observed a golden retriever leisurely strolling on the grassy path. She turned to the woman standing beside the dog, who wore a simple white dress with delicate green patterns. Her long blond hair flowed casually down her back, tied loosely. Her eyes resembled sparkling emeralds, mirroring the nearby trees in their clear depths.

"The Samaritan Women's Spring has been retrieved."

The woman smiled and said, "Did something happen? You should have gotten a messenger to bring it over."

Magician nodded and summarized the key information. Finally, she said, "Coincidentally, we haven't met in the past few days and haven't communicated.

"This led me to know that he had lost the Earth Blood ore, suspected of being stolen by Amon, but I didn't know that he was going to retrieve the Samaritan Women's Spring. You, on the other hand, knew that he was going to retrieve the Samaritan Women's Spring, but you didn't know that the Earth Blood ore had been stolen."

Justice listened in silence for a few seconds before sighing.

"It's very similar to that person's style…"

"Is it really that person?" Magician frowned slightly. When did He cast His gaze over? Did we fail to hide from Him since the beginning?

Justice pondered for a moment and said, "That's not surprising. The most important thing now is what arrangements He has in mind."

"I don't know," Magician replied with a self-deprecating smile. "But since the Samaritan Women's Spring incident has already occurred, I can foresee…"

As she stepped into the void, surrounded by starlight, she sighed and said, “It won’t be long before Fourth Epoch Trier’s door truly opens.”

…

Outside an abandoned castle.

Justice materialized at the door, clutching the golden canister containing the Samaritan Women’s Spring.

In front of her, a dark illusory sea materialized. She stepped into it and arrived in a special dream.

In the dream, not only was a portion of the inverted black mausoleum missing, but it had also split in half. Deep cracks covered its surface, and pale-yellow feathers stained with oil and various symbols of death were scattered everywhere.

Justice floated in midair, tipping the golden canister in her hand.

Under her guidance, a portion of the Samaritan Women’s Spring’s water transformed into dark rain that gently sprinkled onto the ground.

All the damage healed further, and the two halves of the mausoleum gradually closed in.

Amidst this transformation, Justice stowed away the golden canister and gazed at the remaining Samaritan Women’s Spring. She muttered to herself, “Two more rounds should suffice.”

…

On the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian’s bedroom.

After taking a nap, he raised his right palm and realized that the bright red scar had faded significantly. It looked more like the marks left by compression.

Lumian heaved a sigh of relief. That won’t attract too much attention.

His original plan was to wrap his right palm in a white bandage to prevent the Boss and the others from spotting anything amiss.

As for now, Lumian thought for a moment and wrapped the bandage around his left palm, which appeared normal.

After completing this task, he eagerly awaited the compensation Madam Justice had mentioned. He wondered when it would arrive.

He believed it wouldn’t take more than a few days.

Suddenly, Lumian turned his head and looked at the window in the alley behind him.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

There were knocks on the glass.

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Chapter 359 - 359 Malady God

359 Malady God

Lumian glanced over and noticed Franca, clad in a blouse, patting the glass.

He opened the window, a grin on his face, and asked, “Why didn’t you use the front door?”

“Don’t you often resort to window-climbing antics?” Franca leaped into the room with grace, followed by Jenna.

Jenna observed for a moment and pointed at Lumian’s left palm.

“Are you injured?”

Why’s it bandaged?

Lumian chuckled.

“I headed into the fourth level of the catacombs and crossed paths with a creature that seemed like an evil spirit. I had an intense battle with it and ended up with a few scratches.”

Franca examined Lumian’s left palm, perplexed. “Really? The fourth level of the catacombs…”

“Believe it or not, that’s your choice,” Lumian replied with a smile.

Franca got the message and dropped the subject.

Jenna, however, muttered under her breath, “I think it’s a mix of truth and lies…”

Lumian chose to ignore Jenna’s comment and asked, “Did something happen to you guys too?”

“That’s right.” Franca proceeded to recount their encounter in detail and produced a brass key. She eagerly suggested, “Should we try to divine which door this key opens? Whoever’s offering a bounty of 50,000 verl d’or must be loaded!”

Lumian scoffed.

“You’ve got an adventurous spirit, alright.

“Of course, a matter this dark should be left to the Purifiers for investigation. Besides, it involves some monks from the God of Steam and Machinery Church descending into the abyss. You don’t really want to explore the secret cave in the Deep Valley Quarry on your own, do you?”

Franca admitted sheepishly, “To be honest, I’m tempted. The idea of extending life through machinery and giving life to machinery fascinates me. But my rationality keeps me in check.”

Jenna stayed silent, indicating that she had discussed this with Franca on the way.

After sharing her delusions, Franca agreed to let Jenna find a way to hand over the key to the Purifiers and report their encounter.

She then turned to Jenna. “I plan to head to Rue des Fontaines. What about you?”

Jenna had already made plans. She said to Lumian, “Didn’t you ask me to find out where the factory owner lives? Well, I’ve followed him and gathered plenty of information. Now we can locate the families awaiting compensation and guide them into demanding what’s rightfully theirs.”

Lumian replied with a smile, “I didn’t ask you to do it; you wanted to.”

Franca acknowledged his response curtly before proceeding with her plan to visit Rue des Fontaines.

…

In Quartier du Jardin Botanique, at the intersection of Rue Pasteur and Rue Evelyn.

The buildings bore a mishmash of components that seemed like they didn’t belong, like building blocks assembled by a careless child. The place exuded an unsettling vibe, akin to a wild and unstable forest.

Jenna pointed toward a woman crouched by the street, washing clothes, and said, “That’s Madame Mogana. Her husband also perished in that accident a few years ago.”

Madame Mogana wore a worn-out grayish-white patched dress, her face marked by wrinkles that spoke of over fifty years of life.

Lumian, having digested a bit more of the potion’s effects after igniting the Bottle of Fiction, was in no rush. He replied, “You handle it.”

Jenna gazed silently at the gaunt, high-cheekboned Madame Mogana. After a few seconds, she spoke, “Truth be told, I don’t really like her.”

Curiosity piqued, Lumian asked, “Why’s that?”

Jenna let out a sigh and explained, “She’s quite malicious. The kind of person who wishes ill upon her neighbor when she’s going through a tough time. She does despicable things even when there’s no gain for her.

“As you know, my mother was a theater actress and was somewhat literate. She used to work as a tutor for a middle-class family. It was a respectable job with good pay. But when Madame Mogana found out about it, she followed my mother and discovered the family. She told the servants who were out running errands that my mother was moonlighting as a street girl, that she was immoral and skilled at seducing her male employer. Before long, my mother was fired. She had to settle for jobs as a cleaning lady, a dishwashing maid, or even working in a chemical plant.

“Madame Mogana, illiterate as she is, had no chance of getting the job my mother lost because of her actions, but she seemed oddly pleased.”

Lumian nodded in understanding. “Jealousy is indeed one of humanity’s cardinal sins. Why didn’t you take revenge on her?”

Jenna whispered with a chuckle, “That was a long time ago. Besides, in a place like this, similar things are bound to happen sooner or later. When my father passed away, my brother was considered a strong lad. Otherwise, our family would have been in an even worse state. If a widow moved in with her daughter, someone would come knocking on your door the next day, cursing you and claiming that her husband stole a few glances at you. The neighbor would pretend to be friendly and introduce you to her male relatives.

“If you refused, that relative of hers would sit outside your door and drink every day. The police didn’t bother with such matters, and you couldn’t count on anyone else for help. One day, when he got really drunk and bold, I don’t need to spell out what would happen, right?

“Sometimes, the police would arrest him, but arresting one would only bring in a second or third. They might even enrage his relatives. They’d smash your window every night, pile feces at your door, and recruit older kids to harass your daughter.

“But the worst part was being targeted by the mob.

“To survive in a place like this, you either needed a few adult men in the house or you had to be tough and make it clear that you wouldn’t back down even if it cost you your life. Thankfully, when our lease ended, my mother moved to the other end of the street, and the environment improved significantly.”

Jenna’s words were spoken as if she had witnessed such hardships many times before.

While Lumian had faced his own share of difficulties, ones worse than Jenna’s, he had never encountered anything like that. The conflicts and confrontations among wanderers were even more overt. It was a matter of either being beaten into submission, forcing others into submission, or hovering on the fringes like feral

dogs, scavenging what remained of others. When he arrived in Cordu, his sister, a Beyonder, protected him, allowing him to play pranks without worry. The other villagers were mainly subjected to the padre's family's bullying.

He looked at Jenna, who was recounting her past, and asked thoughtfully, "Didn't you say that everyone around here is just trying to survive?"

Jenna cursed, frustration evident in her gestures as she gestured toward the woman washing clothes not far away with her chin. "Dammit, that doesn't excuse their vileness. Take Madame Mogana, for instance. She works three part-time jobs a day just to give her son a chance to escape this place. Heh heh. You might not believe it, but despite maliciously slandering my mother, she sometimes slips me a piece of bread when I'm hungry and waiting for my mother to come home."

Lumian glanced at Madame Mogana.

"People like her are easily instigated."

"Exactly," Jenna affirmed with a nod and walked over.

Her demeanor shifted dramatically as Jenna shouted at the woman washing clothes, "Madame Mogana, did you know? That damned Alphonse betrayed us!

"That piece of dogsh*t always tells us to wait a little longer. He claims that since the court has already passed the verdict, Edmund Sr. would surely compensate us. But that scheming swine plans to run away, with no intention of giving us a single coppet!

"That swine Alphonse must have secretly pocketed his share to say such a thing!"

Madame Mogana stood up, water droplets trickling from her rough fingers.

Her expression twisted with a mix of anger and concern as she asked, "Is that true? I'm going to confront that swine!"

Jenna's face also contorted with resentment.

"We can't waste time on him now. Edmund Sr. is on the verge of escaping!

"Let's hurry and stop him. I know where their family lives!"

Lumian stood about five to six meters away, listening as Jenna stirred up the locals who were waiting for compensation. He casually surveyed the area and realized that this place was similar to Rue Anarchie. Vendors, children, women, and a few men mingled together, crowding most of the road. Occasionally, regular carriages passing by would alter their route after a brief observation.

In the midst of this bustling scene, one individual stood out noticeably.

Draped in an old linen shirt and dark pants, his face was relatively clean, and his hair neatly combed. He contrasted sharply with the surrounding vendors and

residents.

At that moment, the man was engaged in conversation with a few women holding long sticks of rye bread.

He presented a stack of banknotes, not too thick or thin, and counted them meticulously, one by one.

“195, 200… Check if it’s 200 verl d’or?

“If you don’t trust me, you can count it yourselves.”

The smallest denomination of the banknotes was 5 verl d’or.

The women had likely never held so much cash before. They trembled as they counted and confirmed that it was indeed 200 verl d’or.

The man took the banknotes back and counted them again.

“195, 200, 205… See, as long as you sincerely utter God’s name, you get an extra banknote with each count!”

Impressive magic tricks… A swindler? Whenever Lumian encountered swindlers, he couldn’t help but recall Monette and the Salle de Bal Unique. Anger and hostility welled up within him.

The women recounted the money and realized there were indeed 41 banknotes. There was an extra note—an extra 5 verl d’or!

Upon seeing this, the middle-aged man said with solemnity, “My Lord is the ruler of all diseases. If you believe in Him, you’ll never fall sick again. Even if you do fall ill, you’ll recover quickly.

“Illness is the punishment of the Malady God. If you have faith in the Malady God and devoutly worship Him, He will spare you…”

Hearing these words, Lumian’s eyes narrowed as he approached.

He drew his revolver, flipped it skillfully, and then swung it at the middle-aged man’s head.

Bam!

Instinctively, the middle-aged man crouched down, clutching his head. He couldn’t even scream.

Between his fingers, bright red blood began to flow.

Amidst the bewildered and fearful gazes of the surrounding crowd, Lumian crouched down, shaking the barrel of his gun. He smiled at the middle-aged man and remarked, “Come, let’s see how the Malady God heals you.”

The middle-aged man yelled in shock, fear, and anger, “Malady God, hiss, the Malady God will punish you!”

Lumian picked up the banknotes that had fallen and handed them back to him.

“If you can’t count an additional 100,000 verl d’or today, don’t even dream of leaving.”

With that, he raised his revolver and struck the man in the side of his face, causing blood to splatter in all directions. His face caved in, and his teeth were sent flying.

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Chapter 360 - 360 Physical and Mental Wellbeing

360 Physical and Mental Wellbeing

The middle-aged man's fear-filled gaze locked onto Lumian, uncertain about what had triggered this sudden confrontation.

He wasn't the one being deceived, nor was he one of the mobsters who held sway over this neighborhood. He wasn't a relative or a friend of theirs. So, why was Lumian rushing up to assault him like this?

Adding to the confusion, Lumian didn't even give him a chance to defend himself. He unleashed a blow after each sentence!

His eyes fell upon the revolver, and he discreetly glanced at his aides concealed in the shadows. Their hesitance to intervene weighed heavily on his heart.

He couldn't afford to threaten Lumian or resist him. Trembling, he stammered, "I-I can't produce that much money. I didn't bring that kind of cash."

Lumian responded with a regretful smile, "How disappointing. I'm short of 100,000 verl d'or. Who taught you the magic of counting money? Who introduced you to the Malady God?"

The middle-aged man's throat tightened, and he remained silent.

With an air of calmness, Lumian opened the revolver's cylinder, revealing the yellow bullets to his captive.

He then closed the cylinder and pressed the muzzle against the middle-aged man's forehead.

"Three, two…" Lumian's finger on the trigger moved back with each count down.

Panic and terror swelled within the middle-aged man's eyes.

Though he doubted anyone would dare to shoot him in broad daylight, this man had started the encounter with an inexplicable beating. It was impossible to predict how much further he might go.

Just as Lumian reached the final count, the middle-aged man cried out in desperation, "It's the Envoy!"

“Envoy?” Lumian arched an eyebrow.

With his psychological defenses shattered, the middle-aged man abandoned any hope of escaping unscathed. He blurted out, “The Envoy of the Malady God!

“He approached me, taught me some tricks, and told me about the Malady God. He asked me to help him recruit believers, promising a share of the profits.”

Is he a genuine believer in an evil god, a swindler exploiting a deity’s name for riches, or perhaps a blend of both? Lumian withdrew the revolver from the middle-aged man’s forehead and lightly tapped his still-intact cheek with it. A smile crossed his face as he remarked, “Now, that’s more like it. All it took was a little chat, didn’t it?”

Bang!

A bullet tore through the air, embedding itself into a nearby felled tree.

Lumian exclaimed.

“Sorry, it went off accidentally. I didn’t scare you, did I?”

The middle-aged man’s heart pounded wildly, and a small puddle formed beneath him.

Lumian cast a brief glance at the trembling man and offered another reassuring smile.

“What’s the name of this envoy of the Malady God? Where does he reside, and what does he look like? Lately, I’ve been running low on funds, so I thought I’d pay him a little visit.”

Inwardly, Lumian pondered,

He didn’t react to that little prank just now. He’s not a bestowed…

The middle-aged man vigorously shook his head.

“I-I don’t know.”

Seeing Lumian raise the revolver once more, he hastily amended his response, “All I can tell you is that he’s tall and slender, with pale skin, almost as if he’s chronically ill. His eyes are a grayish-blue shade, and he has black hair. It’s short, like the haircut of a wealthy boss’s secretary.

“He visits me once a week, but I have no clue how to track him down.”

Meanwhile, Jenna had joined Madame Mogana and the others, her curiosity piqued by Lumian’s actions. She stole a moment to cast a glance in his direction, wondering what her Hunter companion had uncovered and what he was up to.

However, the urgency of the situation prevented her from inquiring at that moment.

Jenna had effectively instigated several individuals who had been long-awaiting compensation. The more these wronged souls spoke, the fiercer their fury grew. Some had already taken it upon themselves to seek out other victims or their families, urging Jenna to lead them in confronting the factory owner named Edmund.

In the midst of this mounting outrage, Jenna found that she no longer needed to actively instigate. The collective anger had taken on a life of its own, and individuals were stepping forward to aid her in this quest.

As they hurried toward the neighborhood where Edmund Sr. resided, Jenna had an epiphany.

To instigate someone, she had to converse with them, but to instigate a group of people, she didn't need to personally converse with every member of the group to incite them. Understanding the situation and igniting the spark in a few initial individuals was sufficient. The ignited ones would, in turn, become agents of instigation, rallying more people to their cause in a snowballing effect.

While Jenna and the mob progressed toward their destination, Lumian remained behind to extract more information from the middle-aged man. After confirming that he couldn't elicit any further details, he rose to address the deceived women who had been observing the unfolding events.

"You heard him. This guy is trying to deceive you. Do you intend to let him off the hook?"

Lumian had discreetly employed the Niese Face to alter his appearance slightly when confronting the middle-aged man, ensuring that no one would associate him with the wanted criminal, Lumian Lee.

One of the women present had actually been the middle-aged man's collaborator, assisting in the preaching and swindling of money. In this dire situation, she dared not utter a word and looked to the others for guidance.

Among the women, some were brimming with anger, ready to hand the con artist over to the authorities, while others cowered, fearing that the swindler might have dangerous accomplices who would seek revenge.

Lumian observed in silence as they voiced their opinions, casually scanning the onlookers nearby.

Among the bystanders, he noticed three men attempting to slip away unnoticed.

These three were the accomplices of the swindler, responsible for resorting to violence when required.

Without hesitation, Lumian raised his revolver and discharged three rounds.

The trio let out cries of pain and crumpled to the ground, suffering from wounds to their legs and calves, blood streaming freely.

“No need to worry about them seeking revenge,” Lumian assured the women with a grin.

The victims, their emotions running high, fell silent, almost like statues.

After a few seconds, they stammered, “It’s up to you…”

Lumian nodded with satisfaction and motioned for the trembling cheat and his injured accomplices.

“Take them to the nearest… Uh, Steam Cathedral.”

…

At the intersection of Quartier de l’Observatoire and Quartier du Jardin Botanique, 5 Avenue Sèlbù, a swarm of men and women dressed in tattered attire surged toward a beige three-story building.

The two guards stationed at the entrance observed the approaching, agitated crowd and swiftly withdrew their legally owned semi-automatic revolvers. Their voices rang out, commanding, “Halt!”

Confronted with the sight of firearms, even Madame Mogana and her determined followers involuntarily slowed their advance.

The presence of the weapons was undeniably daunting.

Sensing the hesitation, Jenna rushed to the forefront and hollered at the two guards, “We’re here to demand our rightful compensation. The court has already rendered its verdict!

“You sons of bitches, go ahead and shoot if you dare!

“Do you even have enough dogsh*t bullets? Can you take down all of us? If not, each of us will take a bite out of you that you won’t recover from!”

With fiery determination, she strode toward the entrance.

Beads of sweat formed on the palms of the two guards as they peered out at the sea of faces. The sheer number of debt collectors was overwhelming, their exact count obscured by the throng.

It was impossible to predict the response if they opened fire on the crowd. They felt exposed and isolated, like logs confronting a relentless flood.

Jenna, utilizing her Instigation ability, pressed forward with her rhetoric.

“If we disable or kill you, do you think you’ll still receive your compensation?

“Look at us. Our due compensation has been withheld for years. Are you certain you’ll get your payment from that stingy old scrooge? His family might flee town tomorrow!”

The two guards were taken aback.

This was indeed a problem.

Furthermore, they were well aware that the boss’s family had liquidated most of their assets and were on the verge of fleeing the city in two days, seeking refuge in another province. Would they take two injured and incapacitated bodyguards along? Would they seize the opportunity to withhold compensation?

The harsh reality was laid bare before them!

As the guards hesitated, Jenna had already reached the entrance, with the crowd of debt collectors close behind.

Instinctively, one of the guards followed standard procedure, raising his right hand and firing a warning shot into the sky, attempting to deter the approaching horde. The other guard tried to subdue an elegant-looking young woman who appeared to lack substantial combat prowess.

Jenna recoiled momentarily, grabbed hold of the guard’s arm, and unceremoniously brought him crashing to the ground, causing his firearm to skid away.

Spurred by the gunshot and Jenna’s boldness, Madame Mogana picked up the semi-automatic revolver. Although she wasn’t familiar with its operation, her resolve surged, and she sprinted toward the entrance, cursing all the way.

The remaining guard hesitated for a fleeting moment before relenting, opting not to open fire on the advancing crowd and instead allowing them to swarm into the house.

Inside the living room, Edmund Sr. and his family, on the brink of departure, found themselves instantly encircled by Jenna’s nearly hundred-strong assembly of debt collectors. It was an impenetrable wall of humanity.

Clutching a revolver, Edmund Sr. voiced his trepidation, “What do you intend to do?”

“We’re here for our money!” Jenna seized the revolver from Madame Mogana’s trembling hands and leveled it at Edmund Sr. She declared, “Without the compensation we’re owed, we won’t survive. Let’s find out who meets their end today!”

Edmund’s hand trembled, as though he had contracted an incurable ailment.

…

Outside a Steam Cathedral that bore a resemblance to a small factory, Lumian gave instructions to the woman assisting the injured swindler.

“Take them to the padre and have them explain the money conjuring magic and their association with the Malady God. If they refuse to talk, provide an account on their behalf.”

The women nodded solemnly and, with their black eye, guided the swindler’s group into the cathedral, a trail of blood marking their passage.

Lumian holstered his revolver and observed silently from the doorway.

He reflected with a touch of amusement, Madam Magician’s suggestion is indeed on point. It’s healthy both physically and mentally to let off some steam now and then.

Of all things to believe in, they choose an evil god, and on top of that, they’re swindlers!

After a mere two minutes, Lumian casually strolled away, while the police officers hurriedly arrived on the scene.

…

Lumian unexpectedly crossed paths with Jenna and the jubilant debt collectors outside 5 Avenue Sèlbù.

“So quickly?” he inquired, surprise evident in his tone.

Jenna pursed her lips.

“I didn’t anticipate it happening this swiftly either. I was prepared for someone to call the police and handle the situation accordingly. However, once we had Edmund Sr. and his family surrounded, and we issued our threats, he yielded and began paying according to the list.

“Damn it, his family’s cash, gold, and other valuables added up to more than enough for our compensation. There’s even a surplus. And that doesn’t even account for his assets that haven’t been liquidated yet. He delayed our compensation for so long!”

Lumian chuckled.

“Giving always stings. Sometimes things seem complex, but when you truly commit to them, they become simple. And then there are situations that seem straightforward but turn out to be fraught with twists and turns that nearly cost you

everything.”

His words carried the weight of experience.

Jenna knew that Lumian needed gold, and the compensation she had received came in the form of various types of gold jewelry, which were collectively worth 3,000 verl d’or at their pure gold value.

She offered, “Here, I’ll sell these to you.”

Lumian fell briefly silent before responding, “I’ll withdraw the money from Salle de Bal Brise.”

He only had banknotes and silver coins totaling just over 600 verl d’or on him.

In the evening, Lumian found himself with some free time and leisurely returned to Auberge du Coq Doré. He descended to the basement bar and spotted Charlie, beer in hand, regaling a group of patrons with stories.

Lumian grinned and declared, “Drinks are on me!”

Amidst the cheers of 20 to 30 people, Lumian added a playful twist, “Charlie’s footing the bill!”

Charlie’s expression froze.

Lumian chuckled and shouted again, “And if he does a strip dance, I might even cover that too!”

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Chapter 361 - 361 Farewell

361 Farewell

Recently, those who frequented the basement bar had grown indifferent to Charlie's lectures on respectability and civility. Now, with a chance to tease him, they became exceptionally excited and engaged in a shouting match.

Dressed in a white shirt and an unbuttoned black vest, Charlie hesitated between buying drinks for nearly 30 people or performing a striptease.

Swiftly, he set down his beer and leaped onto a small round table.

In the past, when he was drunk here, he had done all sorts of foolish things. Why should he be afraid of a striptease?

Lumian smiled and applauded, taking out a 20 verl d'or banknote and placing it on the bar counter. He said to Boss Pavard Neeson, "A drink for everyone. Let them have whatever they want."

With that, he picked up his glass of Lanti Proof and watched as Charlie clumsily gyrated his hips and carefully unbuttoned his shirt amidst the cheers.

"More passion! More energy!" Lumian shouted, as if he were watching a show.

The other patrons chimed in.

Sweat beaded on Charlie's forehead, fearing that excessive energy from removing his clothes might damage his shirt.

This wasn't a cheap old linen shirt!

After some thought, he decided to take it off as one would a sweater since the top buttons on his shirt were already undone.

Lumian took another sip of the Lanti Proof and leaned back at the bar counter. He glanced at Gabriel, who was wearing black-framed glasses and dark suspenders, and asked with amusement, "You're early today?"

Hadn't this playwright, accustomed to staying up late, only come here for a drink after midnight?

Gabriel held the green absinthe and smiled calmly.

"I'm moving out tomorrow."

“Lightseeker has begun airing?” Lumian immediately had a guess.

Gabriel ruffled his disheveled brown hair and smiled.

“Not yet, but after rehearsing for a while, both Monsieur Lopp and the directors and actors at Théatre de la Renaissance think highly of me. They’re very confident. I won’t have to worry about my living expenses even after moving to a more expensive place and spending the 1,000 verl d’or advance. As you know, I don’t write trite stories for tabloids anymore.”

“Where are you planning to move to?” Lumian asked casually.

Gabriel said with a yearning expression, “Rue Saint-Michel in Quartier 2, where many authors and painters find their haven. Not far away is the National Museum, the Trier Art Center, various galleries, and sculptures of various forms.”

Quartier 2, also known as the arts district or financial district, was a blend of ancient charm and modern opulence, housing not only the artistic community but also the financial heart of the city. It was home to major banks like the Intis Central Bank and the Trier Bank, along with financial institutions, the Trier Stock Exchange, and the Intis Futures Market.

Rue Saint-Michel, on the outskirts of this vibrant district, offered affordable rent, making it an attractive choice for artists and writers.

Lumian couldn’t resist recalling Aurore’s teasing about Rue Saint-Michel, and he playfully paraphrased it, poking fun at the struggling poets. “What a fantastic place! You might toss a brick and hit three authors and two painters, and let’s not forget those poets who die without anyone noticing.”

Gabriel, slightly embarrassed, took a sip of his absinthe.

“However, that’s indeed the most suitable place for artistic exchange and creativity. It’s not like here, where it’s relatively quiet only at night, but it’s only relative. And the repulsive bedbugs…”

Gabriel suddenly remembered that the violent and elegant mob leader beside him was the current boss of Auberge du Coq Doré. He quickly shut his mouth.

At that moment, Charlie completed his striptease act and donned his shirt once more. He skillfully navigated his way out of the crowd of patrons, who had “maliciously” remarked on his physique, and settled beside Lumian. He casually remarked, “I’ve been swamped lately. Haven’t been around for a few days. As soon as I get home, I feel like collapsing into bed. You see, this is the drawback of being a decent bloke. Sigh, why in the world are they suddenly launching such a massive investigation into those wanted criminals from Cordu?”

Oh, you’ve become much smarter. Lumian, who was keen on improving his rhetoric, replied with a smile, “What concern is Cordu’s business to me, Ciel Dubois?”

Having contracted the Niese Face from the Human-Faced Mantis, he wasn't particularly concerned about being recognized by the authorities.

Seeing Lumian's self-assured demeanor, Charlie dropped the subject. He eagerly mentioned that a colleague had introduced him to a female teacher. Although she wasn't interested in him romantically, it marked another stride towards his quest for true dignity.

They continued to enjoy their drinks until nearly midnight. Lumian and Gabriel, who was set to move the following day, bid Charlie farewell and ascended the stairs to the second floor.

Gabriel's gaze fixated on the corridor wall, illuminated solely by a gas wall lamp and adorned with newspapers and faded pink paper. Suddenly, he let out a heartfelt sigh.

"It's only when I'm on the verge of leaving that I realize there's something worth reminiscing about here.

"When I first moved in, I thought it wouldn't be long before I'd escape this dump —well, this wretched motel—with my talents. Who would've guessed I'd end up staying here for ten whole months? Even if I move to Rue Saint-Michel, I'll often think of that cozy little bar downstairs. I'll reminisce about the absinthe that could both sober me up and make me intoxicated, the pungent smell of sulfur, those pesky bedbugs, and the people who brought light to my darkness. Miss Séraphine, Charlie, and… you."

As Gabriel spoke, he paused, extending his hand to touch the crack in the wall where a fallen newspaper had revealed it.

Lumian couldn't resist a playful jab, "Do you authors enjoy launching into spontaneous soliloquies and lengthy speeches?"

Gabriel chuckled sheepishly and replied, "I don't know about other authors, but I do find myself doing it occasionally.

"I've called this place home for nearly a year, and I've witnessed numerous tenants abruptly vanish, leave in haste, or succumb to the pain of life. Yet, the very next day, or maybe just an hour later, new tenants move into the very rooms left behind by those chasing prosperity and dreams in Trier. Most of them fail and fade away like dust, but waves of people keep coming. Perhaps one or two among them will actually succeed.

"This is the wellspring of inspiration for the 'Lightseeker' script."

"You're the one who succeeded." Lumian couldn't help but recall Madame Michel, who had tragically ended her life while singing "In the Capital of Joy, forever Trier," a memory that left him with no capacity for mocking Gabriel.

"Hope." Gabriel's face lit up with anticipation.

He took another step toward the second floor, as if driven to continue ascending.

“Where are you going?” Lumian could guess the answer, yet he asked politely.

Gabriel motioned upstairs.

“To bid farewell to Miss Séraphine and express my gratitude for her unwavering support.”

Lumian couldn’t resist a sly smile, pursing his lips and letting out a playful whistle. “Have a romantic night!”

“I am not!” Gabriel instinctively protested.

Lumian turned and headed towards Room 207, waving his hand dismissively.

“Can’t a person have a romantic night all to themselves?”

Gabriel was speechless.

After witnessing Ciel’s entrance into the room, Gabriel cleared his throat and continued his ascent to the third floor.

As he climbed, memories flooded his mind—the initial encounter with the human model, Séraphine, their first conversation about his creation, and the first words of encouragement…

He understood that human modeling was a meagerly compensated profession. Even the most popular male models barely received 80 to 90 verl d’or a month. Ordinary models scraped by on 60 to 70, equivalent to the earnings of an apprentice motel attendant. Female models fared even worse, with a meager 40 verl d’or, forcing them to take on part-time work. No one chose to expose their bodies as artists’ models out of laziness or greed for pleasure.

Séraphine was no exception. She endured the criticism to earn more money and improve her circumstances.

Gabriel halted outside Room 309 and rapped gently on the door.

“Please come in.” Séraphine’s somewhat hollow voice responded.

Gabriel pushed the door open and found Séraphine standing by the wooden table near the window. Her lake-blue dress had slipped from her form and lay in a heap on the floor.

In the crimson moonlight, Séraphine’s brown eyes flickered, and her brown hair cascaded down her back. Her fair body bore the imprint of human faces.

Some were stunning, some sinister, some handsome, and some wicked. They all fixed their gaze on Gabriel simultaneously.

Gabriel nearly let out a startled cry.

“What’s the matter?” Séraphine’s voice, tinged with detachment, rang out once more.

Gabriel shook off his stupor and realized that the faces were nothing more than lifelike oil paintings. The canvas was Séraphine’s body.

Remembering that she was a human model, Gabriel refrained from probing further. He exhaled and expressed, “I’m moving out tomorrow. Thank you for your encouragement these past few months.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Séraphine extended her right hand, her eyes distant.

Gabriel couldn’t resist complying.

Half an hour later, Gabriel lay on the bed, holding Séraphine close, and spoke with sincerity, “Come with me to Rue Saint-Michel.”

Séraphine shook her head resolutely. “I’m moving as well. Somewhere else.”

Gabriel persisted, “Where to?”

“To a place called the Hostel. My friends are there.” Séraphine’s voice turned hollow once more.

Gabriel made several attempts to convince her, but the human model remained steadfast.

He had no choice but to leave disheartened. Séraphine rose from the bed, entirely unclothed, and watched him as he walked towards the door.

In that instant, the crimson moon was veiled, plunging the room into an unnatural darkness. The oil-painted faces on Séraphine’s body suddenly appeared to come alive, their mouths opening as Gabriel retreated.

Eventually, tranquility returned, and Gabriel respectfully closed the door.

…

The following morning, Lumian stuck to his routine—going for a run, practicing his boxing, and hunting for breakfast in his customary fashion.

Upon his return to the Auberge du Coq Doré, he noticed that Gabriel’s neighboring room was already open. There was no sign of Gabriel, nor any trace of luggage.

Intrigued, Lumian made his way to the third floor and discovered that Room 309 was in the same state.

He clicked his tongue and returned to Room 207 with a wry smile.

Before long, the “doll” messenger made an appearance, tossing a neatly folded letter and a silver mask onto the wooden table.

Madam Justice’s reward has arrived? Lumian’s delight was palpable.

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Chapter 362 - 362 Lie

362 Lie

Lumian hesitated briefly before touching the silver mask. He carefully opened the letter and began to read the elegant handwriting, which was quite different from Madam Magician's.

"This is the promised reward.

"Lie:

"It allows you to truly transform your appearance, adjusting your form within a certain range, and altering your height.

"At the same time, it grants you the ability to use Flame Controlling and Damage Transfer like a Magician. You'll also have an enhanced sense of danger, as well as improved balance and agility.

"It can change its appearance at will. It can become anything you desire.

"But, when you wear it, your emotions will be amplified. You must learn to control yourself, or there will be significant problems.

"Also, remember:

"Don't lose yourself in Lie."

It's actually portable without any negative effects? Lumian's initial reaction after reading the letter wasn't one of delight that Lie's effects suited his needs but rather one of surprise that the mystical item's negative effects were far weaker than he had imagined.

It only amplified one's emotions when worn!

In other words, Lumian could store it in a bag, wallet, or any other container and carry it with him at all times without facing any side effects.

Compared to Lie, Decency had to be ensconced in liquor, making it rather troublesome to retrieve and safeguard. Flog also exerted an influence while being carried.

With a sigh, Lumian couldn't help but make a self-deprecating remark.

Why does it always have to be something that messes with my emotions?

With this combination, even Alms Monk would explode on the spot…

This combination of dark corruption from the contracted creatures, the fluctuations in desire stemming from Flog, and the "gift" bestowed by the Blood Emperor Alista Tudor was sure to wreak havoc on his emotions. When you added Lie to the mix, the equation became something like 1+1+1+1>4.

Having just finished psychiatric treatment for his past wounds and painful memories and returning to his normal state, Lumian realized that if he wanted to avoid descending into madness and losing control, he shouldn't let Flog's boxing gloves and Lie take effect simultaneously.

Lie is meant for the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society gatherings. It's for socializing; I don't need Flog for that. And when I'm not using Lie, I have the Niese Face to replace it, Lumian thought, pondering for a moment before tossing the satchel containing the Flog boxing gloves onto the bed.

After this decision, he reached for the silver Lie mask and covered his face.

The mask began to melt, its silvery substance seeping into Lumian's skin like mercury, completely enveloping his head.

In an instant, everything began to shift and transform. Lumian's contours and facial features swiftly adjusted.

Before long, the silvery liquid seemed to be absorbed or evaporated, and Lumian's skin returned to normal, now even fairer than before.

Then, his body underwent a sudden change, and his white shirt strained against his bulging chest.

Lumian lowered his head and scrutinized his appearance for a few seconds before muttering to himself, There's a limit of 10 centimeters for becoming shorter or taller…

I used to be 1.76 meters tall, just 8 centimeters taller than Aurore, but now I'm 1.81 meters tall. Yes, three centimeters of difference shouldn't be noticeable to ordinary people. Besides, it is quite normal for both men and women to use special shoes to appear taller…

I can even imitate voices. That's all part of the true transformation of one's appearance…

With his loose pants and a snug shirt, Lumian left Room 207 and entered the washroom, casting his gaze at the mirror.

A beautiful woman stared back at him in the mirror. She had long, thick blond hair, light-blue eyes, a tall, delicate nose, and red lips as bright as the morning sun.

The details of her facial features and the contours of her face continued to subtly change for dozens of seconds before settling into their final form.

Lumian gazed at the woman in the mirror, his eyes gradually softening as the corners of his mouth curled up.

After a few seconds, he chuckled and said, “Long time no see, Aurore.”

…

Franca, returning from Rue des Fontaines, gracefully opened the door to Apartment 601.

What she saw when she entered left her stunned—a face identical to her own.

This person had a flaxen ponytail, bright, smiling lake-colored eyes, brown eyebrows that reached her temples, and thin red lips…

Franca’s tension was palpable as she blurted out, “Who are you? Why are you impersonating me?”

The doppelganger also pointed at her and said, “Who are you? Why are you impersonating me?”

In exasperation, Franca laughed and secretly wrapped the spider silk she released around the imposter.

In an instant, crimson flames erupted, igniting the invisible threads around them.

Franca immediately understood the truth. She pointed at the fake Franca and said, “You Six-Eared Macaque, how dare you impersonate me!”

The fake Franca’s face squirmed as she transformed back into Lumian.

His body grew taller.

After removing the Lie earring, Lumian asked curiously, “What’s a six-eared macaque?”

Franca hesitated for a moment, debating whether to keep it a secret, but then she realized that Lumian already knew everything he needed to know. There was no need to hide such trivial details.

She replied, “Back home, there are many myths and legends for your sister and me. The Six-Eared Macaque is one of them. It can hear all your secrets and become identical to you.”

Without waiting for Lumian’s response, Franca asked excitedly, “Did you acquire a mystical item that can alter your appearance and figure?”

Lumian raised his left hand, wrapped in a few white bandages, and replied, “Can’t you see I’m injured? I accepted Madam Justice’s commission and helped her retrieve an object from the fourth level of the catacombs. This is the reward: Lie.”

As he spoke, Lumian flicked the earring-shaped mystical item with his right hand.

“Is that so?” Franca had suspected that Lumian’s visit to the catacombs was likely arranged by the Tarot Club, so she hadn’t inquired further in front of Jenna.

Curious, she asked, “What was the object?”

Lumian pondered for a moment and realized that neither Madam Magician, Madam Justice, nor Madame Hela had asked him to keep it a secret. Hence, he replied, “The spring water of the Samaritan Women’s Spring.”

“Is there really a Samaritan Women’s Spring?” Franca was astonished.

She had read Trier’s mysticism magazines and heard rumors about the Samaritan Women’s Spring. She even went to the catacombs to find the one named by the administrators but found nothing magical.

“Yes,” Lumian confirmed after some thought. “It’s deep in the catacombs and has something to do with Fourth Epoch Trier.”

Franca’s eyes sparkled as she inquired, “Is it magical?”

Lumian glanced at her.

“It’s magical, but it’s only for Beyonders of the Corpse Collector, Warrior, and Sleepless pathways. If you want to give it a try, there’s only one outcome. You’ll forget who you were and the home you keep talking about. From then on, you’ll become a true Trier Demoness.”

Franca shuddered and subconsciously shook her head.

“What’s the difference between that and being dead?”

She stopped asking about the Samaritan Women’s Spring and said excitedly, “Can you transform into Muggle? Let me take a look.”

Lumian gazed at Franca for a few seconds before finally donning the silver-white earring again.

Soon, Aurore, clad in a white shirt, black vest, and simple pants, appeared before Franca.

“Wow!” Franca exclaimed. “She’s even more beautiful than I imagined!”

“Is that the point?” Lumian asked in Aurore’s voice.

Franca smiled sheepishly.

“I’m not sure how close this is to the real Muggle, but we disguise ourselves at gatherings. This is enough.”

Lumian reverted to his original form. As he removed the Lie earring, he said,

“I’ve already written a letter to Madam Hela. She said she’ll inform me about the next gathering and bring me there.”

Franca averted her gaze in disappointment.

“Then there’s no need for me to worry. Yes, let me tell you about the different methods of the gathering and the characteristics of the members of the Research Society…”

Franca’s supplementary class continued until noon.

Seeing Lumian preparing to leave, she hesitated for a moment and said, “Um, can you… can you transform into me again?”

Lumian, puzzled but not refusing, frowned.

Before long, with a reference, he accurately transformed into another Franca.

Franca gazed at her face, seemingly intoxicated.

Suddenly, she extended her right hand and touched Lumian’s cheek.

“Hey!” Lumian took a step back.

Franca snapped out of her daze and smiled sheepishly.

“The feeling of a real person and a mirror is indeed different. However, I feel that you’re still lacking something, but I can’t tell what.”

Lumian pondered for a moment and asked with a smile, “Lacking a feminine charm?”

“Maybe.” Franca exhaled and watched Lumian walk towards the door.

Just as Lumian opened the door, he heard the Demoness of Pleasure shout from behind, “Dammit, were you secretly cursing me? What feminine charm!”

…

In Salle de Bal Brise, as Lumian sat down, Sarkota approached him with a wanted poster and said,

“Those black dogs have been asking around with it for the past two days.”

Lumian glanced at it and realized it was his wanted poster.

He smiled nonchalantly. “It’s fine. Let them search.”

Sarkota didn’t say anything else and informed Lumian, “The Boss wants you to make a trip to Rue des Fontaines today.”

What’s the matter now? Lumian pondered and nodded.

It was almost evening when he arrived at 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.

The lawn seemed to have been ravaged, and the hall filled with weapons and armor was severely damaged.

Upon seeing Gardner Martin, Lumian didn’t hide his confusion.

“Did something happen?”

Gardner Martin, his face glowing, smiled and said, “After the Werewolf incident, they launched a sneak attack and were forced back. They suffered a loss.”

The Rose School of Thought ultimately fell into the Boss’s trap? Seeing that Gardner Martin didn’t want to elaborate, Lumian asked, “Boss, why did you summon me?”

Gardner Martin produced an exquisite invitation.

“Count Poufer invites you to his Red Swan Castle for a salon this weekend.”

Red Swan Castle? Lumian frowned slightly.

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Chapter 363 - 363 Studying Leads to Improvement

363 Studying Leads to Improvement

Lumian still vividly recalled the night he played King's Pie. Nightmares haunted him repeatedly, and every time, he found himself in an ancient beige castle, its surface tainted with the marks of ages-old blood, its interior a horrifying canvas of madness.

"Just remember to let Poufer choose first in situations like the King's Pie game, and you'll be fine."

But I'm no longer the same person I used to be. Can I really depend on being the last to choose to avoid the problem when there's the Blood Emperor's aura corrupting my right hand? Lumian silently pondered for a moment before responding, "Yes, Commanding Officer."

He then inquired, "Where is Red Swan Castle?"

He intended to scout the area when the opportunity arose. At the very least, he needed to pinpoint the location of the nearest cathedral.

"Quartier éraste, near Emperor Roselle's Summer Palace and the West Lognes Forest," Gardner Martin replied succinctly.

Quartier éraste was designated as 17. In Roselle's time, it served as a suburban retreat for nobles and royalty, but now it was enclosed within the city walls, becoming one of Trier's largest districts. Known as the barracks district due to its multiple army encampments, it was situated in the northwest, boasting a national park, West Lognes Forest, a conference center, and numerous arsenals. Additionally, it was home to the Church of the Eternal Blazing Sun's largest cloister in Trier, the Sacred Heart Cloister.

Lumian recalled a map of Trier he had seen and nodded in acknowledgment.

"It's near the square district."

Emperor Roselle's summer palace wasn't situated in Quartier éraste; it resided in the square district, nestled between West and East Lognes Forest.

Gardner Martin cast a glance at Lumian's left hand.

"Why are you injured?"

Lumian smiled candidly and said, “I recently delved into the catacombs with a friend I met at a mysticism gathering and got injured.”

He couldn’t shake the feeling that the Iron and Blood Cross Order had an interest in the underground world, possibly with spies lurking around the tombs. It was safer to focus the lie on something else. The Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society also doubled as a mysticism gathering, after all.

Gardner Martin nodded with approval.

“Avoid unnecessary explorations and risks in the future. They won’t bring you the mystical knowledge you seek, nor will they yield valuable items. Only danger, danger, and more danger awaits.”

Is that so? Does the Samaritan Women’s Spring count as a high-value item? Lumian inwardly criticized. Nevertheless, he earnestly agreed,”Yes, Commanding Officer.”

Had it not been for Madam Justice’s request, he would have had no inclination to venture into the catacombs’ fourth level.

Now, the odds drew closer to zero. He couldn’t help but wonder if he might stumble upon another of Amon’s tombs!

After bidding farewell to Gardner Martin, Lumian hopped onto a public carriage headed back to Avenue du Marché.

Amidst the rhythmic sounds of horses’ hooves and the carriage’s wheels, a sudden thought struck Lumian.

The Bliss Society only lost Charlotte Calvino and Susanna Mattise, the high priestess. There are still other members to contend with, such as Maipú Meyer, the former manager of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, or the actresses who had once played lead roles there before departing.

I wonder if Susanna Mattise had divulged the details of the Tree of Shadow to these members. If she had, they would likely know that the high priestess’s true target was either me, Ciel Dubois, or rather, Lumian Lee…

If that were the case, the Rose School of Thought and the Bliss Society might redirect their focus towards me. That could spell trouble…

How annoying. I really wish I could eliminate every member of the Rose School of Thought and the Bliss Society…

Towards the end, upon realizing the various negative effects on him, Lumian cursed inwardly before controlling himself.

If it weren’t for the Actors’ remarkable skill in disguise and concealing themselves, he might have seriously contemplated eliminating all members of the

Bliss Society to eliminate any hidden threats.

He suspected that the Flog boxing gloves might have a miraculous effect on individuals with twisted desires, like those in the Bliss Society.

How should I find them? Lumian fell into deep thought.

Just then, as the public carriage pulled into a halfway stop, a passenger boarded.

It was a boy, around seven or eight years old, dressed in a white shirt and a miniature black formal suit with matching shorts. He wore white socks and black shoes, had short blond hair, and his brown eyes held determination. His chubby cheeks suggested he still had traces of baby fat.

Oh, isn't this Baron Brignais's godson, Ludwig? Lumian's mood brightened as he smiled.

Almost simultaneously, Ludwig noticed him

and his expression turned to panic. He swiftly attempted to disembark from the carriage.

He was still carrying the heavy dark-red hard school bag.

Running away from home again? Lumian thought as he stood up, alighting from the carriage ahead of schedule.

The boy had already disappeared from the vicinity of the stop sign.

He's quite fast… Lumian identified the nearby footprints and calmly chose a direction.

Escaping a Hunter's pursuit without addressing tracks promptly was nearly impossible.

After trailing the footprints for a couple of streets, Lumian turned into a secluded alley and approached a half-broken barricade that barely reached waist height. He couldn't help but chuckle as he said, "Come out."

Ludwig cautiously peeked his young face out from behind the barricade, a mixture of nervousness and resentment evident in his voice as he said, "You swindler, stay away! If you come any closer, I-I'll devour you!"

Lumian raised his right hand and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Why did you run away from home again?"

Lumian couldn't help but tease, "Yo, you've learned to curse. You've improved since last time."

He noted that Ludwig, even if his unusual appetite and eating habits were disregarded, seemed more like a real child now compared to their previous encounter.

With this in mind, Lumian concluded, “This proves that studying is still useful.”

Ludwig was momentarily taken aback and seemed to forget to retort.

Lumian sized him up and said sincerely, “You weren’t born with a high IQ; in a way, you’re relatively less intelligent. But if you don’t study, do your homework regularly, and occasionally take exams to gradually improve your thinking abilities, I can guarantee that someone like me could easily deceive you the moment you step outside, and you wouldn’t even realize how you fell for it.”

Ludwig muttered to himself in a daze, “Did I really improve? Is studying, doing homework, and taking exams really useful…”

You’re not born stupid, are you? Is your brain damaged? You believed me just like that? I can’t even imagine what would happen to you if you were thrown at the Salle de Bal Unique’s entrance… As Lumian muttered inwardly, his smile remained unwavering.

“That’s right. If you find it too burdensome, talk to Brignais about reducing the amount of homework. There’s no need to run away from home. Giving up on studying will only make you more foolish.”

At that moment, Lumian had a single prevailing thought:

It is better to keep such abnormal and brainless humans or humanoid creatures under the supervision of the orthodox Church.

However, wouldn’t the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom be too arrogant to think that Baron Brignais could control a fellow who ate everything he saw?

He has already escaped twice!

If he hadn’t encountered me every time, he would have caused trouble long ago!

Ludwig fell silent for a few seconds before he spoke up, “Will you negotiate for me?”

Lumian didn’t hesitate in his response, “No problem.”

Negotiating was something he was quite experienced in, especially when dealing with his sister.

“Then I’ll trust you again.” Ludwig hesitated for a moment before making up his mind.

He then flipped over the dilapidated barricade.

Don't say that. It'll only make me feel like scamming you again… Lumian muttered and led Ludwig to the nearest public carriage stop.

On the way, he glanced at the boy's filthy clothes and said, "Did you bring a change of clothes?"

"No." Ludwig shook his head.

Running away from home without any spare clothes? Lumian asked in amusement, "So, what's in your bag? Food?"

Again, Ludwig shook his head, displaying a rather obedient attitude.

It's not food or clothes… Lumian cast a puzzled glance at the dark-red hard school bag.

"It can't be filled with books and papers, can it?"

"No either…" Ludwig suddenly shut his mouth.

What could it be? Lumian narrowed his eyes.

At that moment, Ludwig asked innocently, "Is there anything to eat?"

"No, we'll eat when we return to Avenue du Marché," Lumian replied mercilessly.

What a joke. With your appetite, why would I use my own money to treat you?

Disappointed, Ludwig let out a sigh and began sucking his finger, as if he wanted to take a bite out of it.

Fortunately, their destination, Avenue du Marché, wasn't too far away. After another stop, they arrived, and Lumian spotted Baron Brignais waiting at the entrance of the usury company. The gentleman visibly relaxed upon seeing Ludwig.

"This can't go on," Lumian interjected before the other party could speak. "Do you think I'll keep running into him every time? Reduce his homework by half."

Baron Brignais weighed the options for a moment. "Okay."

Ludwig interjected in a hushed tone, "And add another dessert meal."

With the godfather and godchild relationship seemingly back to normal, Lumian bid them farewell and couldn't help but wonder, Why did the Church of the God of Knowledge and Wisdom send such an abnormal child to Trier?

…

In the hill district, in Deep Valley Town, in front of an old grayish-white house with only two floors, Valentine and Imre, now in possession of the brass key obtained from Celia Bello, stood behind the Deacon Angoulême with serious expressions.

According to the feedback from a Sealed Artifact, the brass key left behind by the mysterious entrustee of the gatekeeper’s disappearance pointed to this very building.

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Chapter 364 - 364 Red House

364 Red House

The door to the grayish-white old house creaked open, needing no key to grant access.

Inside, chaos reigned, with assorted items strewn about, as if someone had burglarized the place.

Valentine surveyed the disarray and remarked, “Someone’s made off with valuable items from here.”

His gaze fell upon the open and empty doors to the first-floor rooms, evidence of heavy boxes that once occupied the space.

“We’re too late. The entrustee’s companion must have sensed trouble and moved out,” Imre lamented.

The Purifiers fanned out, scouring the cramped area for clues.

Before long, Angoulême discovered a handful of white papers scattered near the stairwell’s edge. He carefully examined them in the sunlight.

Taking a pencil from his pocket, he began to gently shade one of the papers.

Gradually, faint marks emerged, forming a few legible words: “Albert Goncourt… Underground… Riot… Time…”

“Albert Goncourt…” Imre glanced at the paper in the deacon’s hand and couldn’t help but frown.

Albert Goncourt had been the mastermind behind the Trier uprising six years ago, a leader of the Carbonari—a prominent anti-government militant faction.

Angoulême remained silent, urging his team to press on with their investigation.

After thoroughly searching both the first and second floors, they descended into the cellar.

At the far end stood a black iron door, its brass lock gleaming in the dim light.

Angoulême patted the grayish-white humanoid machine by his side and inserted the brass key he had obtained from Celia Bello into its palm.

Immediately after, Angoulême adjusted a few knobs on the mechanical contraption.

From the high-energy pyrokinetic backpack on the robot's back, a billowing white mist erupted. Steadily, it pushed the rigid machine forward, guiding the brass key into the lock at the correct height.

Watching this spectacle, Imre couldn't help but sigh, "Deacon, among the Inquisition—no, the entire Church—you're truly the most fond of mechanical creations."

Angoulême glanced at his usually laid-back subordinate and replied, "I don't discriminate, whether it's a product of the Church of the God of Steam and Machinery or not. I only care about its utility.

"When a robot malfunctions, we can fix or replace it. If a person breaks down, I'll be dealing with compensation claims and grieving friends and families."

The Purifiers recognized the deacon's protective tone and turned their attention to the grayish-white humanoid machine with a smile.

Currently, it could only be used to move things and hammer nails. It could barely walk and run. It couldn't do any intricate or brain-intensive operations, and it didn't last long enough. Otherwise, it would have saved them a lot of trouble.

With a mechanical click, the robot turned the brass key, and the heavy iron door swung open.

A thin fog billowed from within, distorting the door and revealing ethereal faces, etched in the mist, contorted with hatred and pain.

The faces were formed by white fog, filled with hatred and pain.

They clawed and cursed at the mechanical creation opening the door, but it remained impassive.

Rays of brilliant sunlight descended one after another, swiftly clearing the fog behind the black iron door.

As the fog dissipated, Valentine and the others saw what was there.

It was a small altar, made of grayish-black stones, rising only halfway up.

Angoulême, after repeated confirmations that the area was safe, guided the robot inside.

He observed a shallow, narrow groove on top of the grayish-black altar, suggesting that something had once been embedded there but was now gone.

"A ring?" Angoulême mused in a hushed tone.

…

In the market district, at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, at the entrance of Apartment 601.

Franca sported an exquisite shirt adorned with lace flowers at the collar and cuffs, paired with her beloved beige breeches under the sunlight. Her slippers completed the ensemble as she gazed at Lumian. Franca questioned, “Why are you here again?”

Not wasting any time for his response, she raised her hand and quipped, “If you transform into Muggle, you’re more than welcome!”

Lumian pushed his way into the room and scanned his surroundings.

“I need to discuss something with you.”

“What’s the matter now?” Franca, visibly apprehensive, inquired, “Can’t you wait patiently for the gathering next week?”

Lumian chuckled.

“How about a trip to Trocadéro, specifically the Red House Café?”

“The Red House Café known for hosting women’s orgies?” Franca asked in surprise.

Oh, you remembered it immediately. You must have been thinking about it a lot, right? Lumian replied with a smile, “Yes.”

Franca shook her head.

“Forget it, forget it. Fantasizing about it is enough. No need to actually go. It would be too indulgent. I must maintain control, resist desires, and avoid complete indulgence.”

Then, she scrutinized Lumian and remarked critically, “Don’t tell me you intend to use Lie and Transfiguration to disguise yourself as a woman and infiltrate the orgy for firsthand experience?”

Lumian mocked, “Did you truly think that through, leading you to believe I’d consider such a plan? This is a serious matter!”

He recounted the Rose School of Thought’s failure and his concerns.

“Someone from the Bliss Society mentioned that they’re in contact with members of the Moment Society and the Narcissus Society, who also participate in the Red House female orgies. They want to convert them into believers of the Mother Tree of Desire.

“If we follow this trail, we might uncover the core members of the Bliss Society, or at least eliminate Maipú Meyer and those who were aware of Susanna Mattise’s rough plan.”

Franca nodded slightly and said, “Moreover, we can’t entrust this to official Beyonders. If they extract any information, your cover could be blown.”

With a resolute expression, she declared, “Since it’s a serious matter, we have to be there.”

Then, with enthusiasm, she asked, “When are you planning to go? Do you know the party’s time and the conditions for an invitation?”

“That’s today’s objective. Visit the Red House Café, enjoy coffee for an hour or two while subtly displaying your feminine charm. See if you attract the attention of potential contacts among the homosexuals or identify any women who might be orgy participants. Initiate conversations and establish connections to gather further intelligence.” Lumian understood the importance of a methodical approach, especially in delicate situations like this one.

Franca nodded heavily.

“No problem.”

Lumian produced Lie, in the shape of a silver necklace, and handed it to Franca.

“Use this to alter your hair, eyes, and facial features. You can’t appear in your true form. What if Maipú Meyer is lurking? He’d recognize you as the current boss of Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons in an instant!”

As soon as Franca finished donning Lie, she said eagerly, “Let’s go now!”

Lumian’s lips curled up.

“I forgot to mention that this mystical item amplifies the wearer’s emotions.”

“Uh…” Franca was taken aback. “No wonder I’ve been feeling so anxious!”

Lumian added with a smile, “Emotions that weren’t there before won’t be amplified.”

“…”Franca, clenching her teeth, retorted, “Well, my desire to punch you has definitely been amplified.”

Lumian ceased his mockery and began to earnestly explain the functions and precautions of Lie.

Franca walked to the full-body mirror and observed her hair rapidly turning black, her pupils turning dark brown, her skin becoming more delicate, and her lines softer.

Compared to her flamboyant beauty, she now appeared more composed and mature. Her facial features leaned towards elegance, giving her an indescribable charm.

Gazing at her altered reflection in the mirror, Franca remained silent for a prolonged moment.

“It doesn’t resemble your true appearance, but it’s still beautiful and charming,” Lumian complimented objectively.

He wanted to say that she had the charm of a Demoness, but he chose not to agitate Franca.

Franca snapped out of her daze and silently changed into non-red boots before walking towards the door.

Upon entering the corridor, she snapped out of her daze and glanced at Lumian beside her.

“If you’re giving me Lie, how do you plan to disguise yourself as a woman? Are you relying on the transformation illusion?”

Lumian replied with a hint of amusement, “Who says I’m masquerading as a woman?”

He led Franca to a new safe house on Rue du Rossignol, retrieved a brownish-yellow ritualistic dog skin, and wrapped it around himself.

Then, he recited an incantation in Hermes.

“Dog!”

A dark light suddenly surged from the ritualistic dog skin, enveloping Lumian completely.

In an instant, a large dog with brownish-yellow fur appeared in the room.

Franca, with her black hair and brown eyes, was taken aback.

She finally understood Lumian’s plan for monitoring the situation at the Red House Café.

After a moment of curiosity, Franca asked, “What does it feel like to become a big dog? Are you sure you don’t feel burdened?”

The brownish-yellow-furred dog rolled its eyes at Franca and opened its mouth. “Woof!”

Are you stupid? Do you think dogs can speak and answer your questions?

Franca clicked her tongue and, with Lumian in brownish-yellow dog form, hired a rental carriage to head to Trocadéro Town, west of Lavigny Docks.

Along the way, Lumian had the urge to bite her several times. From time to time, she would curiously stroked his dog fur, stomach, and head, hoping to find something distinct from a real dog.

After more than an hour, the carriage arrived outside Trocadéro.

Franca paid the fare of 2 verl d'or, and Lumian, in his dog guise, hopped out, behaving as if he had no connection to her. He began to scout the streets for the Red House Café, which emitted a distinctive aroma of fermented grapes.

Soon, he located the establishment near East Lognes Forest.

While the entire building wasn't red, it sported a magnificent mushroom-shaped red roof. The main structure was beige, adorned with bold graffiti on the walls.

Lumian settled near the café's entrance, lying down quietly, and watched as Franca, transformed into a black-haired beauty, entered the establishment.

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Chapter 365 - 365 Observation

Observation

The ambiance at the Red House Café radiated a small-town charm. Enamelware utensils, wooden-framed decorative paintings, checkered tablecloths, and exposed ceiling beams gave it a simple yet elegant vibe, a striking contrast to its vibrant and trendy exterior.

Franca, seated by the window, ordered a cup of fragrant Intis coffee and basked in the sunlight.

With a casual glance around, she observed the clientele and waitstaff.

Most of them were women, particularly the waitresses, and their attire and graceful movements indicated specialized training.

Only two men, seemingly foreign wine merchants, sat across from each other, discussing the impact of this year's abundant rain and sunlight on grape quality. Among the three female patrons, one was a local elderly woman with gray hair, dressed modestly, occasionally greeting passersby. Another was in her thirties, wearing a veiled black hat and a blue corset dress, her features fairly ordinary. The third, a striking beauty with delicate eyebrows, had naturally cascading brown hair in wavy curls, dressed simply, and exuded a calm demeanor.

Apart from the local elderly lady, the other two might be participants in the orgies. Franca turned her attention away, thinking that the first floor, with a dozen or so tables, didn't seem like the place for such private affairs.

Her guess was that it might be happening in the basement or on an upper floor closer to the distinctive red mushroom roof.

From Franca's vantage point, she had a clear view of the café's entrance. Lumian, in his brownish-yellow dog form, lay there quietly, soaking up the sun and keeping a close eye on everyone entering and exiting the Red House Café, as well as the patrons and waitresses inside.

No one paid much attention to the wild dog by the roadside, except for a few stray dogs that passed by.

One of them bared its teeth at Lumian, who occupied his usual spot, and growled menacingly.

Lumian felt somewhat helpless. Could he really engage in a dogfight in his current form?

This wasn't a significant concern for him, but what mattered was that the Animal Creation Spell had sealed most of his Beyonder powers, reducing his strength to that of a dog.

Of course, given his size as a large dog, intimidating smaller canines was a breeze. However, the dog growling at him was also quite substantial, albeit on the thin side.

Fight! Fight! Franca couldn't contain her excitement as she watched the scene unfold through the window.

She had no intention of intervening; it was a rare opportunity to witness Lumian in such an awkward situation. How could she resist the spectacle?

Lumian, sprawled by the door, raised his right palm—no, his right foreleg. Drawing from past experiences, he focused a portion of his consciousness on his paw.

A faint sense of madness and a scent of blood, perceptible only to Lumian, hung in the air.

The brown-furred dog, its skeletal frame visible, was taken aback and hastily retreated with its tail between its legs.

Oh… Come on! Be more daring! Why run away? Franca, inside the Red House Café, was left disappointed.

She couldn't fathom why the dog had suddenly become afraid of Lumian.

The Hunter couldn't unleash his full powers—he could exude an aura of provocation at best!

Simultaneously, Lumian chuckled self-deprecatingly.

If The Blood Emperor ever found out that I used His aura to scare off dogs, He might just skin me alive, wouldn't He?

After the brief interlude, Franca refocused her attention on the café.

Drawing from her experience and observations in fashion magazines, she gracefully sipped her coffee and occasionally performed everyday actions that highlighted her feminine charm, all learned over the past year.

It didn't escape her notice that nearly everyone in the café had their eyes on her. Some glanced discreetly, while others openly admired her, some even offering warm smiles.

The elderly local lady, who had been seated nearby, smiled at Franca, picked up honey-roasted chicken wings from her plate, and made her way out of the Red House Café.

Stopping in front of Lumian, she mumbled to herself in amazement, “It’s another one…”

Lumian had an uneasy feeling as he watched the old lady squat down and offer the brownish-yellow roasted chicken wing to him.

After a moment’s hesitation, he bit into the chicken wing like a real dog, allowing the old lady to stroke his furry head.

Truth be told, he wasn’t accustomed to eating like a dog, but fortunately, the old lady stood up and departed after a couple of affectionate strokes.

Inside the Red House Café, Franca couldn’t help but burst into laughter as she watched Lumian awkwardly nibble at the chicken wings. Unable to resist her amplified emotions, her body trembled with laughter.

If she didn’t need to maintain her image, she might have doubled over in laughter.

She also wanted to take something to feed Lumian!

In her natural state, Franca’s true charisma shone through. Her black hair, brown eyes, and effortless elegance captivated those around her, giving her a unique and magnetic presence in the café.

The mysterious charm of her black hair and brown eyes, along with her elegant and casual demeanor, made her uniquely attractive.

At that moment, a woman wearing a light-colored hunting suit rode up on a brown horse from the nearby racetrack near East Lognes Forest.

She skillfully dismounted and removed her hat.

Her long, orange-red hair flowed like a waterfall, adding a touch of wildness to her otherwise clean, pure, and exquisite face.

Carrying a whip, the woman in the hunting attire secured her horse and made her way into the Red House Café. She approached the quiet and beautiful young woman.

Franca had ceased her laughter at Lumian’s antics and couldn’t help but feel that this new arrival seemed more like a participant in the orgies than anyone else present.

Despite being the most beautiful with exquisitely delicate features that gave her an innocent appearance, there was an aura about her that could easily pass for that of a man.

There was likely to be someone like her at a female orgy.

Franca elegantly raised her right hand and brushed back the black hair that had fallen across her lips, subtly displaying her own feminine charm.

The woman with long orange-red hair, who had been unconsciously surveying the café's occupants, appeared visibly taken aback, as if she had been momentarily stunned.

However, Lumian, who had been lying quietly by the entrance, noticed a slight furrow in the woman's brow after her initial surprise.

She averted her gaze and continued her approach toward the quietly elegant woman with wavy hair. They engaged in light banter before they ascended the wooden stairs to the second floor amidst some chatter.

Franca observed them from the corner of her eye and began to form a rough idea.

There is a strong likelihood that these two are indeed participants in the female orgies, though whether they belonged to the Moment Society or the Narcissus Society remains uncertain.

Franca continued to sip her coffee leisurely, deliberately making no move.

After more than half an hour had passed, and with no sign of the women descending, she decided to leave her seat and walked out of Red House Café.

She planned to call it a day, so as to not risk arousing suspicion by approaching them too hastily.

Her plan was to maintain her cover as a resident of the nearby Lavigny Docks and return to Trocadéro every two or three days, or even more frequently. After all, this area was renowned for its wine production and scenic beauty, attracting numerous tourists daily. It would be entirely plausible for a lady who had recently moved nearby to explore the area.

Lumian, stationed at the entrance of the Red House Café, appeared disinterested, as though he had no connection to Franca's actions.

Almost simultaneously, his sharp senses detected the beautiful woman with long orange-red hair standing behind a glass window on the second floor.

The woman observed Franca's departing figure with a solemn, vigilant, and contemplative expression, devoid of any apparent homosexual romantic interest.

Why is there such a reaction? Did she discover something amiss with Franca? How did she discover it? Lumian felt puzzled as he stood up, as if he had soaked up enough sun, and moved to the alley between the Red House Café and the neighboring building, which was closer to Franca's departure direction.

Before long, the woman with long orange-red hair reappeared behind the second-floor window.

She carefully scanned her surroundings, confirming that no one was paying attention. There was only a brownish-yellow dog dozing off in a corner. Gently, she pushed open the window and gracefully descended to the alley below, as light as a feather.

Immediately after her descent, the woman with the clean and pure appearance blended into the shadows.

Lumian, pretending to be in a state of drowsiness, silently observed this unfolding scene, his mind racing.

Featherfall… Shadow Concealment… Beauty… Remarkable charisma… Could she be a Demoness?

Was it precisely because she is also a Demoness that she sensed something unusual about Franca's appearance and demeanor, prompting her to follow and observe?

Lumian discreetly stood up and began to follow Franca from a distance, giving the appearance of a leisurely stroll.

The orange-red-haired woman remained hidden in the shadows, elusive and difficult to pinpoint. Lumian couldn't ascertain her exact location, but he was certain that she was not far from Franca.

Franca, playing her part convincingly, didn't seem in a hurry to leave Trocadéro. She embraced the role of a tourist, visiting the nearest vineyard, sampling the free red wine at a shop, and purchasing some regional specialties.

Just before noon, Franca entered the town's upscale department store and began trying on various styles of women's clothing.

As Lumian watched, nearly fifteen minutes later, he lost sight of Franca. It was then that he observed the clean-looking woman in hunting attire emerging from the shadows in a corner of the department store, her eyes scanning the surroundings.

Franca had successfully shaken her pursuer.

Lumian's guileless dog face lit up with a gratified smile.

The final stage of today's operation, getting rid of the would-be stalker, had been executed flawlessly. Franca, with Lie's assistance and her ability to counter divination, had done a commendable job!

She must have utilized the shoppers in the department store, changing into a different set of clothing as a ruse, transformed herself, and exited openly to evade detection.

After the woman in the hunting attire returned to the Red House Café, Lumian left Trocadéro and made his way toward Quartier éraste.

While still in his canine form, he intended to explore the vicinity of Red Swan Castle.

Guillaume Bénet's Animal Creation Spell had a duration of seven days, after which it would naturally dissipate, requiring a new ritual.

As Lumian had anticipated, Red Swan Castle stood atop the hill, its beige exterior tainted with the marks of age-old blood. It stood in eerie silence, surrounded by a small river.

Lumian conducted a few circles around the area before arriving at the closest church building—the Sacred Heart Cloister of the Eternal Blazing Sun Church.

Beneath the shade of the green trees, he squatted quietly and gazed at the magnificent golden building adorned with steeples.

During his observation, Lumian couldn't help but notice a golden retriever squatting more than ten meters away, its attention also fixed on the Sacred Heart Cloister.

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Chapter 366 - 366 Demoness Sect

Demoness Sect

Are all the dogs around the cloister so devout? He retracted his gaze while criticizing.

He quickly left the forest behind.

His primary concern was to chart a route from Red Swan Castle to the Sacred Heart Cloister, taking note of any advantageous terrain and hiding spots along the way. What the Sacred Heart Cloister actually looked like or if it held any special significance was of little concern to him.

By mid-afternoon, Lumian had thoroughly scouted the area surrounding Red Swan Castle. He discovered several potential escape routes, some following the main road, some along the freight railways, others winding through forests, past lakes, or over hills. Not only were they well-concealed, but they also featured natural traps.

Initially, Lumian had contemplated infiltrating Red Swan Castle in his canine form, but he soon realized that security was exceedingly tight. Stray dogs were not tolerated, and intruders faced certain death.

Unfortunately, the Animal Creation Spell only permits transformation into larger animals. The implicit requirement is that the hide must be able to envelop a curled-up human. Otherwise, I could transform into a rat. I don't believe they could guard against that! He sighed and retreated to a nearby secluded spot.

With his spirituality, Lumian manipulated the air within the dog hide and murmured two words of Hermes.

"His Grace!"

Creating a sound in this manner was not challenging for Lumian. What proved difficult was that his spirituality was constrained by the Animal Creation Spell. It could not extend beyond his body or the dog hide, and it was in limited supply. Thus, any sound produced remained confined to the dog hide, hidden from others' ears. Furthermore, he could dispel the incantation after uttering a few words.

In a swift, shadowy motion, the brownish-yellow dog skin split open, revealing Lumian's human form.

He crawled out, carefully folded the hide, and cradled it against his chest.

Though it had lost its mystical properties, Lumian had no intention of discarding it. Finding such a complete and large dog hide was a rarity.

I only have one ritualistic dog hide left. I must conserve it. Lumian muttered these thoughts as he resumed his journey along the familiar road toward the nearest town.

In a bustling metropolis like Trier, ritualistic dog hides proved more practical than ritual sheepskin or cowhide. Donning the latter two and transforming into the corresponding animals would undoubtedly draw attention. After all, who wouldn't be tempted to guide a lone sheep wandering the streets home to prepare it into various delicacies? Moreover, in Trier, there were those with perverted inclinations, ones who fancied sheep buttocks.

…

As Lumian returned to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, the night had already fallen, casting a dark veil over the city.

Franca swiftly changed back into her usual attire and settled into the recliner, her gaze fixed warily on the Lie necklace resting in a corner of the coffee table, as though it might spring to life and ensnare her at any moment.

"What's wrong?" Lumian closed the ajar door behind him and casually stowed away the Lie necklace.

Franca's expression shifted, and she sighed, confessing, "After I returned, I found myself with idle time, so I attempted to adjust my appearance, but…"

At this point, she let out another sigh, her emotions a mixture of fear and nostalgia.

"I became entranced by my own reflection in the mirror!

"I've never seen such a flawless woman. Just by gazing at her face, I could do so for an entire day—no, for eternity!"

Lumian contemplated her words for a moment before responding, "You can use Lie to deceive others, but never deceive yourself."

"I understand, but the allure of the Demoness of Pleasure and the effects of Lie are genuinely potent," Franca admitted earnestly. "It wasn't easy for me to regain control. I forcibly removed the necklace and tossed it onto the coffee table. While my fixation may be partially due to its amplification properties, I can't help but reminisce. I can't help but yearn to give it a try. Heh heh, my mind has passed the test."

With the Lie necklace out of her sight, Franca visibly relaxed. She chuckled and remarked, "Were you meme–uh, using your sister's way of speaking to caution me?"

“Yes, in preparation for your upcoming gathering,” Lumian confirmed, making no effort to conceal the fact that he had been practicing Aurore’s manner of speech recently.

Franca nodded thoughtfully and commented, “It felt quite natural. If it remains at this level, deceiving them shouldn’t pose a problem.”

Without awaiting Lumian’s response, the Demoness of Pleasure playfully inquired, “So, how did the honey-roasted chicken wings taste?”

Lumian provided an objective assessment, “They were decent.”

Franca’s curiosity and teasing spirit persisted as she asked, “Could it be that your taste buds were improved due to your canine senses? Had your sense of smell become more acute?”

Lumian replied with an experimental tone, “It does have some influence on me, but I haven’t transformed entirely into a dog. I still retain a significant portion of my human senses.”

Franca continued, “And what about other aspects?”

After a moment of contemplation, Lumian explained, “Other aspects? It’s more like my soul is confined within a real dog’s body. Everything I do is restricted and influenced by my physical form, including…”

Seated on the divan, he raised his leg, mimicking the posture of a canine taking a leak.

Franca exclaimed, “You really don’t care about your image at all, do you? It doesn’t bother you?”

Lumian shrugged, responding, “What’s there to be concerned about?”

Franca thought for a moment before posing her final question, “One last thing, will you be affected by dog hormones and react strangely to other dogs?”

“The body is mine, and the dog is just a disguise. It’s merely an external constraint.” Lumian’s expression suggested he wasn’t a fool.

He then adopted a mimicry of Madam Magician and asked, “Are there any more questions?”

“I’m done.” Franca was satisfied.

Lumian chuckled.

“Then it’s my turn to ask. What are your thoughts on the ladies you observed today?”

Franca absently twirled a few flaxen-colored strands of hair that had come loose from her ponytail as she replied, “There are two potential suspects…”

She proceeded to recount her speculation and added, “That woman with the orange-red hair still gives me an odd sensation, as if she’s drawing me in.”

Lumian smiled approvingly. “You’re onto something. She’s at least a Demoness of Pleasure or a Beyonder with a corresponding mystical item.”

After identifying that the Beyonder belonged to the Demoness pathway, Lumian sensed a magnetic allure in every gesture she made, similar to Franca’s. It was a bit challenging for him, with most of his abilities sealed, to resist such temptation. Fortunately, Alms Monk’s endurance held firm.

“Demoness?” Franca pondered the possibility and mused to herself, “That makes sense. How could a gathering of females dedicated to pleasure not attract one or two Demonesses…”

Lumian had a moment of realization and posed a question, “Is it to bring pleasure to others and oneself?”

He sensed that this might be a fundamental requirement for their acting.

“That’s one aspect of it. Even if it weren’t for the potion, I’d still want to attend. However, I can control myself, but the same can’t be said for other Demonesses,” Franca said with disdain and a sigh.

Lumian, not fully grasping the implication behind her words, remarked, “She followed you but you managed to shake her off.”

“Ah…” Franca was momentarily surprised. “She should be from the Demoness family.”

“The Demoness family you mentioned?” Lumian had previously heard Franca briefly mention this secret organization.

He had always been curious about how Demonesses could form families.

Matriarchal society?

Franca sighed and said, “Yes, it’s also known as the Demoness Sect. Its origins trace back to the descendants of the Primordial Demoness during the Fourth Epoch. The Primordial Demoness is a Sequence 0 of the Assassin pathway, essentially a true deity. She’s widely regarded as an evil god, also known as the Chaos Demoness.”

Primordial Demoness… Lumian committed the name to memory.

Franca continued, “The core of the Demoness family always includes a descendant of the Primordial Demoness, but they also recruit or cultivate

Assassins with different surnames. It's essentially a sect that controls all the potion formulas and most of the resources related to this pathway.

"Only a Demoness from the Demoness Sect would tail a wild Demoness upon their first encounter."

"To retrieve the Beyonder characteristic?" Lumian inquired.

Be it recruitment or elimination, it was a way of reclaiming Beyonder characteristics.

Franca pursed her lips and responded, "Exactly. They don't want the Beyonder characteristics of the Demoness pathway to be lost outside their sect. Moreover, they hold a deep disdain for female Assassins and eliminate any they come across."

"Why?" Lumian couldn't comprehend.

Franca shot him a resentful glance, as if blaming him for asking such a question.

She sighed and said, "It's because the Primordial Demoness was originally male. During the process of attaining godhood through the Assassin pathway, She transformed entirely into a woman. This transformation left Her mind twisted and filled with agony. The Demoness Sect claims they want to emulate the Primordial's experience.

"So, every Demoness in the sect was once male. After enduring immense pain and suffering, they became profoundly distorted. They yearn to see other men undergo similar ordeals. Perhaps you don't know, but these Demonesses seek out men to father their children. Baby girls are sent away, while baby boys are kept behind to relive their mothers' lives."

As Cordu's Prankster King, Lumian couldn't help but shake his head in disbelief.

"Isn't this incredibly twisted?"

"What's even more twisted is that these children's fathers eventually become Demonesses themselves." Franca recounted the information she had obtained from Madam Judgment and exhaled in fear. "I've been avoiding them, not wanting them to discover me."

"But you're originally a man. Why should you be afraid?" Lumian asked, puzzled. "Are you worried that being around them might corrupt you and warp your senses after joining the Demoness Sect?"

Franca nodded solemnly.

"Yes.

Besides, I'm already a Minor Arcana card holder of the Tarot Club. How could I possibly join the Demoness Sect?"

Lumian fell silent for a few moments before speaking again.

“Didn’t you want to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order too?”

“That’s different. It’s a mission for the Tarot Club,” Franca defended reflexively.

Lumian didn’t press the issue and instead nodded thoughtfully.

“No wonder you mentioned that female orgies easily attract Demonesses.”

Franca scoffed.

“It’s just that most Demonesses are members of the Demoness Sect and have connections either vertically or horizontally. Otherwise, half of the female orgies might consist of Demonesses.

“What’s even more extreme is that when you receive an invitation to a strip ball and attend with enthusiasm, it’s always packed with men.”

After muttering a few words, Franca looked at Lumian and asked awkwardly, “So, what should we do next?”

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Chapter 367 - 367 Salon

Salon

Lumian understood Franca's concerns and smiled.

"First, consult with your Major Arcana card holder about the possibility of establishing contact with the Demoness Sect. Remember, you originally were a man, so there's no need to fret about being eliminated. As long as you can pass their background checks, you can tap into their resources to enhance yourself. And when pretending isn't an option anymore, have your Major Arcana card holder assign you a mission to steer clear of Trier and make a swift getaway.

"Think about it. You're already at Sequence 6. Most of the top-tier resources are within the Demoness Sect's grasp. Infiltrating their ranks and acquiring these resources from within is a much simpler and safer route compared to making enemies and taking risks to hunt them. Of course, this hinges on your Major Arcana card holder providing a way to elude the watchful eye of the Primordial Demoness."

Franca was taken aback and mumbled, "How do you sound so experienced…"

Lumian scoffed. "Are you amnesiac? I'm doing something similar right now. I'm infiltrating the Iron and Blood Cross Order on behalf of the Tarot Club.

"What's the major perk? Once I complete the Iron and Blood Cross Order's mission, I can claim rewards from Gardner Martin and report back to my Major Arcana card holder. I can use the pretext of my spying progress to secure rewards from her—two rewards with one mission. Otherwise, why do you think the number of mystical items on me have increased so rapidly?"

Of course, he didn't need to mention Mr. K's contributions to Franca.

"Two rewards with one mission…" Franca repeated it a few times before a realization dawned on her. "I've been cooperating with you on missions related to the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Will this clash with contact with the Demoness Sect?"

Lumian's expression said: "As expected, you're still inexperienced."

"There's no clash; why would there be? Simply convey to the Demoness Sect your desire to transition to the Hunter pathway at Sequence 4 and revert to your original gender. That's your motivation for pursuing leads on the Iron and Blood Cross Order. You've already left enough clues and made substantial progress.

“From what you’ve described, those Demonesses went from being men to women. I refuse to believe they haven’t considered leveraging the pathway switch to regain what they’ve lost. That reason should be enough to convince them.

“Moreover, Demonesses and Hunters belong to neighboring pathways. They surely have ulterior motives concerning the Iron and Blood Cross Order. Given your opportunity to infiltrate them, they’re more likely to embrace you than hinder you. In fact, they might even value your presence.

“Most importantly, if things go as planned, you could become the Demoness Sect’s liaison responsible for matters related to the market district and the Iron and Blood Cross Order. If you want the higher-ups among the Demonesses to be aware of what’s transpiring here, they’ll be informed. If you prefer keeping it under wraps, they’ll remain oblivious. For instance, Jenna being a female Assassin.”

At this point, Lumian smiled.

“You can also exploit the Demoness Sect to nurture Jenna. When the high-ranking Demonesses discover that a powerful pure female Demoness is paid for by their own sect, won’t they lose control on the spot?”

It was an intriguing thought. It could be described as extreme provocation and mockery.

Franca nodded indiscernibly.

“Kid, if you had taken the Instigator potion, you might have fully digested it within a week.”

“I’m just kindling a specific fire within you.” Lumian leaned back on the sofa.

Franca couldn’t help but scoff in a half-mocking, half-teasing tone.

“If I were to genuinely join the Demoness Sect, and you reach the Sequence 5 qualitative transformation without obtaining a Sequence 4 potion formula and the corresponding main ingredient from the Iron and Blood Cross Order, would you consider becoming a Demoness?”

“…” Franca was taken aback. “Are you sure you won’t find it mentally burdensome?”

Lumian borrowed a phrase from his sister’s vocabulary.

“I’ll do whatever it takes.” He then added, “I’ll stop at nothing to achieve my goal.

“Besides, can’t we just switch back when we reach Sequence 3?”

“You can’t just switch at will. Most Beyonders never advance beyond Sequence 4 in their lifetime, let alone Sequence 3. As they ascend, it becomes increasingly difficult. Whether it’s the risk of losing control or obtaining the necessary

resources, the challenges remain the same," she cautioned.

Lumian let out a chuckle.

"Anyway, it's all just a fantasy at this point, isn't it? To confirm if it's feasible at all."

Franca was left momentarily speechless and then inquired, "You mentioned two directions. What's the other one?"

"The other option is to track down the Demoness of the Demoness Sect and extract detailed information about the female orgies from her. Subsequently, focus on identifying potential members of the Bliss Society among the participants. As soon as you can, pinpoint the core members with close ties to Susanna Mattise and eliminate any hidden threats," Lumian explained the alternative plan concisely.

"While it's a viable plan, if the Bliss Society members aren't directly involved in the female orgies and are merely associating with certain individuals, targeting the Demoness alone might not provide the information we need. Additionally, it's bound to draw the attention of high-ranking members of the Demoness Sect, leaving little room for further investigation. I'll start by reaching out to my Major Arcana card holder and inquire if she has any reservations about my contact with the Demoness Sect." Franca analyzed after some thought.

She was clearly tempted by Lumian's suggestion.

Lumian acknowledged her analysis without rushing her. After all, she wouldn't return to Trocadéro's Red House café for another two or three days, with an invitation to Count Poufer's salon preceding that event.

…

Three days after scouting the surroundings of Red Swan Castle and informing Madam Magician and Mr. K of the invitation, Lumian arrived at the beige castle in a four-wheeled four-seater provided by Gardner Martin.

He chose not to dress too formally for the occasion. No tailcoat, top hat, or cane that stereotypically marked a gentleman.

Instead, he wore a light-brown hunting suit, off-white breeches, and brown boots. In his hand, he held a Loen-style deerstalker hat, allowing his golden-black hair to catch the wind.

Lumian was aware, through Aurore's gossip, that appearing overly grandiose in a literary and artistic salon like this would make him appear out of place among the other participants, possibly even a laughingstock.

Of course, this outfit had been funded by Gardner Martin's recent contribution of 10,000 verl d'or, costing Lumian a total of 1,000 verl d'or.

Holding the invitation letter, Lumian underwent the guard's scrutiny and passed through the imposing several-meter-tall door.

In this area, there was a hall, but it was relatively modest. It served as a waiting area for the butlers, valets, maids, and guards accompanying the guests during a grand banquet.

Lumian scanned his surroundings and confirmed that this wasn't the hall from his unsettling nightmare.

Beyond the hall was the atrium, and on the opposite side stood Red Swan Castle's main edifice.

It rose six to seven stories high and was encircled by a ring of towers.

In his nightmare, a man with dark-red hair had gouged out his own brownish-red eyes from behind that very window.

Now, however, there was nothing behind the clear glass window but a slightly mottled light-colored wall.

Mottled… Shouldn't the rooms' walls have been repainted? Aurore had mentioned that the annual maintenance cost for such an ancient castle is astronomical… Lumian shifted his gaze away and proceeded to enter the main building.

The moment he crossed the threshold, his eyes narrowed, and his heart sank.

This hall was an exact replica of the one in his nightmare!

From the crystal chandelier hanging high above to the spiral golden staircase leading to the second floor, everything mirrored his dream with eerie precision.

Though Lumian had expected this, encountering it in reality stirred up complex emotions within him.

The male servants in the hall, adorned in their vibrant red uniforms with golden trimmings, stood in two neat rows to welcome Lumian's arrival.

Lumian's eyelids twitched, finding the vividness of the red to resemble flowing blood.

The salon was situated in a spacious living room on the first floor, elegantly decorated with a thick, dark red carpet adorned with intricate patterns. A set of plush sofas graced one side of the room, and bar stools and armchairs were scattered around them.

On the opposite end of the living room, a tall young woman sat at a brown piano. She wore a simple yet pristine sky-blue-patterned white corset dress, and her auburn hair cascaded gracefully down her back.

As Lumian entered the living room, the girl's fingers danced gracefully across the piano keys, conjuring a sprightly melody.

Count Poufer occupied an armchair, engaged in conversation with an elegant lady with black hair, blue eyes, and an air of refinement as she leaned against the armrest in a crouched position, chuckling merrily.

Novelist Anori, Painter Mullen, critic Ernst Young, and Poet Iraeta, each accompanied by their female companions, were either gathered on the sofa, engaged in conversation, or lingering near the table adorned with desserts and roasted meats.

In addition to these well-known figures, other guests filled the room. Lumian scanned the crowd and spotted a familiar face.

It was Laurent, the inhabitant of Auberge du Coq Doré, rumored to have used Madame Lakazan's hard-earned money to frequent upscale cafés and mingle with high society.

Laurent still donned the same pristine black tailcoat, and his neatly combed brownish-yellow hair followed a precise 30-70 cut. He stood out amidst the casually attired authors, painters, poets, and critics surrounding him.

He displayed no restraint in his interactions, his dark-brown eyes sparkling as he exchanged pleasantries with the gathered guests.

Within moments, Laurent locked eyes with Lumian, and his pupils dilated, as if he had encountered an evil spirit.

I-Is this not Ciel Dubois, the current owner of Auberge du Coq Doré and the infamous mob leader?

In an instant, fear coursed through Laurent's veins.

He worried that Lumian might expose his true identity, jeopardizing the connections he had painstakingly cultivated.

He was on the verge of success!

Oh, you're doing quite well. You've even received an invitation to such a salon… Lumian remarked with a smile, pointing to himself as if to suggest that they both belonged to a certain type and could feign ignorance of each other.

A sigh of relief escaped Laurent as Lumian approached Count Poufer.

With a hint of annoyance, he grumbled, "You didn't inform me about bringing a female companion. You're making me look like a fool!"

"Haha." Count Poufer and the others chuckled, delighted that their prank had succeeded.

After the laughter subsided, Count Poufer gestured toward the girl at the piano.

“If you don’t mind, you can invite my cousin, Miss Elros.”

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Chapter 368 - 368 Speculator

Speculator

Lumian settled into an armchair with a polite smile aimed at Count Poufer. He responded, “That would be my honor.”

With a graceful gesture, he extended an invitation to Miss Elros.

Count Poufer, dressed in a crimson shirt, waved his hand.

“After she finishes playing this piece.”

Lumian shifted his gaze towards the piano, finally getting a clear view of Miss Elros.

Her chestnut eyebrows framed her expressive brown eyes, which sparkled with a youthful vibrance. The delicate curve of her cheeks and gentle facial contours suggested her age to be under 20, and there was no apparent trace of Sauron lineage.

Lumian surmised that Elros likely inherited her Sauron lineage from her maternal side.

He turned away briefly, his fingers wrapping around a glass of red, white, and blue liqueur resting on the coffee table. Engaging in lively conversation with Count Poufer, Novelist Anori, and others, Lumian discussed the latest trends and scandals circulating in their circle.

He had been diligently reading newspapers like Novel Weekly, Journal des débats, Youth of Trier, and Ghost Face to keep himself well-informed for occasions like these.

The black-haired lady who had been kneeling beside Count Poufer had already moved away to observe the newspaper editors engaged in a game of billiards.

Lumian was aware that she couldn’t be Count Poufer’s wife. Aurore had once enlightened him about the peculiar customs of Trier: in intimate gatherings and small-scale balls, the male and female hosts refrained from appearing together. It was considered improper and might invite unnecessary gossip. Therefore, when one of them hosted a salon, their spouse would attend someone else’s event.

Back when Lumian first learned of this, he was barely fifteen, and it struck him as a bizarre set of rules. Now, reflecting upon it, he couldn’t help but think:

You Trieriens have devised such absurd and comical unwritten rules to facilitate discreet affairs, and everyone willingly adheres to them!

As the musical piece concluded, Elros gracefully left the piano and made her way to the sofas. Her cousin introduced her to Lumian, pulling over a barstool for her. She sat with her legs neatly together, a silent observer of the ongoing conversation.

As time flowed by, others gradually converged in their direction. Laurent followed a casually-dressed, middle-aged man who sported an impressive beard.

Count Poufer took it upon himself to make introductions, saying, “This is Cornell, the editor-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien.”

Lumian had perused the newspaper before, and he vividly recalled the advertisement for the “interstellar bridge to the crimson moon” featured in its pages.

Now, with that memory in mind, he couldn’t help but suspect that it might be a cleverly disguised scam or perhaps a piece of Trierien performance art. He also harbored suspicions that it might be connected to devotees of some evil god.

“This is Ciel Dubois, the general manager of Coastal Import and Export Corporation,” Poufer introduced the identity Gardner Martin had fabricated to Cornell.

Cornell extended his right hand with a look of surprise as he greeted Lumian. “You’re quite the young lad.”

Lumian accepted the handshake, offering a charming smile.

“This is the result of my unwavering diligence and hard work.”

Just as Poet Iraeta was on the verge of commenting on the diligence of most individuals present without becoming the general manager of a large company at such a young age, Lumian added a touch of self-deprecation to his tone.

“It’s precisely because I excelled in both areas that my father appointed me as the general manager of the import and export company.”

The room erupted in laughter as everyone grasped Lumian’s meaning.

Their perception of Ciel Dubois underwent a positive transformation.

In their social circle, there was no shortage of individuals who had landed important positions at a tender age due to familial connections. These people typically either avoided mentioning their parents and elders, striving to demonstrate their self-proclaimed abilities, or they struggled with confidence and maturity, endlessly fixating on their fathers or uncles. There were very few who exuded the kind of openness, honesty, and humor that Lumian effortlessly

radiated. Back then, Count Poufer could scarcely be counted among them.

Lumian, with a touch of mischievous humor borrowed from his sister, turned his gaze toward Laurent and inquired, “Who might this be?”

Thud! Thud! Laurent’s heart raced in response.

While they had an unspoken agreement not to reveal each other’s true identities, Laurent lacked a thorough understanding of Ciel Dubois, the mob leader, and worried that Lumian might suddenly change his mind.

Cornell, the editor-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien, gestured to the young man by his side.

“This is Laurent. He’s remarkably talented, well-informed, and unfailingly polite. I’ve been observing him for nearly three months, and I’m considering offering him a position as my assistant and deputy editor-in-chief. Laurent, how do you feel about this unexpected proposition?”

Laurent initially found himself taken aback, but soon, he was overwhelmed by joy and felt a slight sense of vertigo.

All the pains and anxieties he had endured, from his mother’s tears to his neighbors’ disdain, had led to this moment.

He had always believed that with his talents, he shouldn’t be stuck at the bottom, and he had been actively seeking an opportunity, even if it meant squeezing his mother dry to maintain a facade of dignity.

Laurent refrained from displaying excessive excitement and responded to Cornell with a gracious smile, saying, “It would be an honor.”

Not bad at all, Lumian thought as he assessed the situation. Speculation could be a risky endeavor, but the rewards could be substantial. However, there’s the importance of changing one’s mindset and genuinely starting from their current position. Speculating to improve social status might lead to losing everything in the long run. Lumian recalled his sister’s comments after losing in the stock market as he considered Laurent’s actions.

He was unlike Charlie and others; Lumian held a disdain for those who exploited their mothers in the speculative process. As long as Laurent’s mother could accept it and didn’t resort to violence against her son or show strong resistance, Lumian didn’t pass harsh judgment.

With Cornell and the others now seated, Lumian’s curiosity led him to ask, “Where did you first encounter Laurent?”

Cornell responded with a smile, “At the Vichy Café. He often visits to engage in discussions about various Trier-related matters and to share his opinions.”

Vichy Café—the place where 5 verl d'or could buy half a bottle of mineral water and two boiled eggs? Laurent's mother, Madame Lakazan, doesn't even earn 3 verl d'or after a long day's work. Yet, the investment has clearly paid off. Even a rookie deputy editor-in-chief at a newspaper like Le Petit Trierien earns nearly 5,000 verl d'or annually, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Lumian observed the differences and realized that Laurent's fixation on speculative networking had a certain logic.

Still, success in such endeavors was a rare occurrence—one in a hundred at best.

Lumian cast a glance at Laurent, who eyed him with caution, and smoothly changed the subject with a smile.

"Cornell, I happened to come across an advertisement for the Interstellar Bridge in Le Petit Trierien last month, or perhaps even earlier. It piqued my interest. Any comments about it?"

Cornell indulged in a puff from his pipe before bursting into laughter.

"I believe it's a bunch of delusional folks, but since they paid, there's no reason why I shouldn't run their advertisement. Maybe it can fool some fanatical enthusiasts of mechanics and science."

"How are they now?" Lumian chuckled. "I'm even thinking of investing in them, just to see if they're swindlers or if they can actually produce something."

Poet Iraeta picked up his pipe and muttered, "You might as well sponsor me instead of investing in them. At least then, you can berate me for writing like a piece of dogsh*t, and I won't have any comeback."

Lumian played along, acting as if money was of no concern to him. "No problem. How about 5,000 verl d'or?"

His intention was to give Iraeta only 3,000 verl d'or later, using the excuse of not having enough cash on hand at the moment.

Iraeta lowered his pipe and spread his arms theatrically.

"Praise the Sun and let Ciel's malice strike harder!"

"Haha, let's head back to the old city together after the salon." Lumian subtly hinted at his intention to sponsor Iraeta later but refrained from handing over the money directly to avoid the stink of money.

Following this brief diversion, Cornell seemed to warm up to Lumian's presence.

"I'm not sure how those people are faring. They only paid for a one-month ad."

As the conversation flowed, Count Poufer glanced at the setting sun and proposed a game with a warm smile. "Shall we play King's Pie? Consider it a warm-up

before dinner."

Is this the only game you know? Do you have a childhood… Lumian couldn't help but inwardly critique Count Poufer's choice of games, but he refrained from objecting.

The others readily agreed, and Count Poufer promptly instructed his valet to bring out the sizable King's Pie that had been prepared in the kitchen.

It resembled the lid of a grand saucepan, emitting a tantalizing aroma and color.

"Who shall be in charge of the cutting?" Count Poufer surveyed the participants, his gaze sweeping over each of them.

After a moment's thought, he decided, "Elros, you do the honors. You're the youngest and most beautiful lady here."

Elros, seated on a barstool beside Lumian, gracefully rose and took up the table knife to start dividing the King's Pie.

Rather obedient of your cousin. Living off the Sauron family, off Count Poufer? Lumian realized that Elros's techniques were deft, perhaps from frequent practice.

In no time, the colossal King's Pie was divided into roughly 29 portions.

As was customary, Count Poufer proposed offering the extra slice to his ancestor, Vermonda Sauron, and no one voiced any objections.

After completing this part of the ritual, the living room seemed to descend into an eerie silence, as if the very atmosphere outside the castle had solidified.

Count Poufer then turned his attention to Lumian and Laurent. "Laurent, this is your first time attending my Saturday salon with Ciel. You'll be the first to choose."

Lumian laughed and said, "Of course, the host should be the first to choose. Don't you all think so?"

Instigated by him, the other participants readily agreed that the male host should have the honor of making the initial selection.

Count Poufer didn't insist and took up a slice of King's Pie, addressing the group, "Whoever bites into the gold coin shall be king."

Seeing that the Sauron family member had made the first choice, Lumian felt more at ease and leaned forward to survey the slices.

This was double insurance. First, he would let Count Poufer make his selection. Then, while there were still plenty of slices left, he would exploit Termiboros's aversion to the matter to choose a slice without the gold coin.

This time, Termiboros remained silent, not offering any warnings. Lumian naturally picked up the King's Pie slice he had personally selected.

But as he settled back into his seat, his mind spun unexpectedly. It was as if he saw the narrow glass window once again, and the image of the dark-red-haired man who had gouged out his own eyes intruded upon his thoughts.

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Chapter 369 - 369 King? No, Emperor!

King? No, Emperor!

Compared to his previous nightmare, Lumian could now “see” him more clearly. The dark-red-haired man behind the narrow glass window bore a striking resemblance to Count Poufer.

It was identical to Lumian Lee from Cordu Village, not the current Ciel Dubois!

When the dark-red-haired man with Lumian’s face gouged out the bloody eyeball, Lumian’s eyes ached, and his vision darkened.

Simultaneously, wild laughter echoed in his ears, infecting him to the point where he wanted to release his frustration, unleash violence, and satisfy his bloodlust.

Suddenly, his right palm heated up, and pure madness surged into his mind.

Out of nowhere, frustration, violence, and bloodthirst surged out of him as the maniacal laughter instantly ended.

Lumian’s vision returned to normal, and he saw Novelist Anori sitting across from him, with Count Poufer beside him.

They grinned as they observed the other participants selecting slices of King’s Pie, completely unaware of the unusual changes happening to Lumian.

Lumian counted the King’s Pie slices that had vanished and glanced at Laurent, who was engrossed in his choice. He realized that only a few seconds had elapsed, but it felt like an eternity.

Drawing upon his Alms Monk abilities, he resisted the emotional turmoil stirred by the Blood Emperor’s presence. He faintly perceived a peculiar, insane, bloody, and ruthless mental impression lingering in the void above him.

The desire to infiltrate Lumian’s body, sending shivers down his spine, remained suppressed by Alista Tudor’s hidden aura; it dared not descend. Instead, it circled above the living room, akin to vultures eager to feast on carcasses but cautious of nearby predators.

None of the participants in the King’s Pie game detected the existence of such a manic spirit glaring fiercely at them from above. They giggled and selected their slices of King’s Pie.

Come, dance with the Blood Emperor! Let's see who's crazier, you or Alista Tudor! Lumian scoffed inwardly, his emotions in turmoil.

Of course, he understood that his Blood Emperor aura was a mere facade. If the spirit were to forcefully enter his body, he wouldn't have the power to resist it. All he could do was hope that Mr. Fool's seal would activate and yield some effect.

However, judging by appearances, the frenzied and cruel spirit lacked any rationality. It operated solely on instinct and harbored an innate fear.

Lumian took a moment to collect himself. While observing Elros and the others choose their King's Pie slices and sensing the frenzied spirit's erratic movements, he contemplated the corresponding dilemma.

This appears to be the core of the Sauron family's King's Pie game…

Poufer employs his bloodline and a simplified ritual to summon the lingering spirit of his ancestor, allowing it to inhabit the person who consumes the symbol and becomes the king…

If a frenzied and bloodthirsty spirit were to truly take control of my body and corrode my mind, I might lose my sanity instantly. It's nearly impossible for ordinary individuals to resist such a force. What does Count Poufer rely on to maintain his composure? At the very least, he seems normal and has become king countless times…

No wonder Termiboros insisted I switch slices last time. If I were to lose control, He wouldn't fare any better…

Son of a sow! Why didn't you warn me today? Did you choose to remain silent because you knew I possessed the Blood Emperor's aura and wouldn't succumb to this insane mental invasion?

Could it be that the Sauron family has a special method for preserving the spirit of a high-ranking individual across generations? Or could Vermonda Sauron actually still be alive? Or perhaps the Beyonder trait he left behind has become too corrupted? Is the Sauron family attempting to gradually eradicate it using this method? But it's been two to three hundred years!

Hmm, this crazy spirit continues to hover above my head without descending… Will it eventually retreat, change its target, or trigger other alterations?

Lumian remained on high alert, keeping a constant watch on the frenzied spirit lingering in the air.

If it displayed any signs of forcefully invading through the Blood Emperor's aura or causing other unfavorable developments, Lumian would opt to "teleport" away.

Anori, Mullen, Iraeta, and the others each selected their King's Pie slices, leaving only the one reserved for Vermonda Sauron on the plate.

Count Poufer surveyed the surroundings with a grin and declared, “Everyone, let’s dig in. The one who finds that gold coin will be the king for today.”

With that, he elegantly sampled a portion of the King’s Pie in his hand, then took a few more bites. His countenance gradually shifted from one of confidence to one of blank panic.

There was no gold coin!

Count Poufer stared at the other participants in disbelief, his assurance of control crumbling.

In that moment, a single thought consumed his mind:

No, this can’t be! I’m the one who most closely resembles my ancestor!

His eyes fixed on Elros, the sole guest possessing the Sauron family’s bloodline.

Though Elros was perplexed by her cousin’s frantic and intense gaze, she still took a few bites of her King’s Pie slice.

Yet, still, there was no gold coin to be found.

Count Poufer’s confusion deepened. His gaze darted around, his mind racing with conjectures.

Could there be an illegitimate son of a family member here?

No, even if there were, I bear the closest resemblance to the ancestor!

Could a high-ranking member of the Hunter pathway be present?

Impossible!

Or perhaps someone here has been tainted in the underground world?

Lumian noticed Count Poufer’s distressed head-scratching, and most of the game participants had sampled their King’s Pie slices. He gradually lifted his right hand and took a bite.

As anticipated, his teeth encountered a solid metallic object.

He spat out the item onto his left palm. It was, without a doubt, a 10-verl d’or gold coin.

Novelist Anori let out a chuckle.

“Ah, a new king at last. It being always Poufer tires me out. He was getting rather dull with his pranks.”

Lumian picked up the gold coin and cast a cold glance at Anori.

“Who gave you permission to speak?”

Anori’s body quivered, and he instinctively clamped his mouth shut.

Lumian struggled to maintain control over the influence of the Blood Emperor’s aura. He sensed the frenzied spirit above him spiraling faster and faster, as if growing more impatient and savage.

He surveyed the surroundings leisurely and offered a smile.

“From this moment forward, I am your King. Or would you prefer to address me as Emperor?”

For some inexplicable reason, all the participants, including Count Poufer and Miss Elros, experienced a stirring in their hearts, as if they were compelled to heed Lumian’s commands.

Of course, it was merely a pulsing sensation, induced by the combined impact of his words and aura.

Among them, Poet Iraeta, who had recently entered into a sponsorship agreement with Ciel Dubois, rose nonchalantly, pressed his hand to his chest, and bowed.

“Indeed, Your Majesty!”

The others followed suit, either embracing the spirit of the game or yielding to the pulsing sensations in their hearts. They stood and offered their bows in their own unique ways.

“Indeed, Your Majesty.”

Lumian’s lips curled into a satisfied smile as he signaled for everyone to retake their seats.

Then, he turned his gaze towards Count Poufer and raised his chin slightly.

“I command you to present 30,000 verl d’or worth of gold.”

Count Poufer was taken aback, a whirlwind of complex emotions surging within him.

This was the first time he had been subjected to the King’s Pie commands.

He had an urge to respond with a jest, but he remembered the gravity of the consequences if he disobeyed the king’s orders during this mystical game. He would meet a dreadful fate.

Count Poufer clenched his teeth and rose from his seat.

“Indeed, Your Majesty.”

Exiting the living room, he ascended to a floor of the castle’s main building and retrieved five hefty gold bars from a secure vault.

For him, parting with 30,000 verl d’or wasn’t a significant loss.

Seeing Count Poufer offering him gold bars totaling 30,000 verl d’or, Lumian couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret.

Had he known that his orders would be followed to the letter, he might have demanded even more!

The dilemma now lies in how to discreetly make off with the gold later. In normal circumstances, even if I accepted 30,000 verl d’or in person, I would have to privately return it. Failing to do so could offend Count Poufer… Moreover, I need to figure out how to explain to Gardner Martin that I had become king while remaining unaffected. Lumian pondered as he tucked away the five gold bars.

Then, he turned to Novelist Anori.

“Your mission is to bestow a kiss upon someone here. Your target is…”

As Anori eagerly eyed the beautiful women present, Lumian pointed towards Poet Iraeta, who had just taken a puff from his pipe.

“Our poet.”

A momentary silence hung in the air, followed by a whistle from one of the guests, and then the others joined in.

Reluctantly, Anori stood up and muttered, “I really don’t want to kiss that guy with bad breath. I could accept it if it were Mullen…”

Despite his reservations, he complied, giving Iraeta a gentle kiss on the lips.

Iraeta took it in stride, chuckling, and remarked, “I can sense your discomfort, Anori. Pull yourself together. Don’t act like a naive country bumpkin.”

Lumian observed with an impassive expression, his attention primarily drawn to the swirling madness.

Though it refrained from attempting to invade anyone’s body, the influence of the madness made everyone slightly restless, their emotions displaying signs of instability.

Upon hearing Iraeta’s teasing, Anori’s countenance turned icy, as if he contemplated picking up a table knife and stabbing him.

However, he ultimately restrained himself.

Lumian suspected that as the game unfolded, the participants would grow increasingly agitated, irritable, and prone to bloodlust while the madness continued to linger.

At that very moment, a piercing, terrified scream echoed from somewhere within the castle.

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Chapter 370 - 370 Sending Off

Sending Off

A chilling scream, filled with terror, reverberated through the living room, causing the hearts of every guest to race with fear.

Painter Mullen was very sensitive to this. His pale-white complexion exchanged a concerned look with Count Poufer.

“What happened?”

Count Poufer furrowed his brow, puzzled by the sudden disturbance.

Upon hearing Mullen’s question, he snapped back to attention and casually reassured everyone,

“It seems there may have been an accident. I’ll have a servant find out the details. Don’t worry, it won’t disrupt our gathering. What could possibly go wrong?”

With that, Count Poufer signaled to his valet, positioned discreetly in a corner of the living room, to investigate the source of the scream.

Then, he addressed the assembled guests, saying, “Please, let’s continue.”

As he spoke, the Sauron family member directed his gaze towards Lumian.

Ever since presenting the gold bars, he had been closely watching Emperor Lumian, analyzing every subtle movement and expression. He was determined to unravel the mystery of how Lumian had chosen the King’s Pie slice with the gold coin and not him.

Lumian fought to keep his composure in the face of the madness that seemed to consume him and turned his gaze towards Painter Mullen.

“Create a piece of art using your buttocks.”

In his role as Cordu’s Prankster King, Lumian had an array of tasks in his arsenal to assign to each participant in the game, ensuring that none of them would forget their missions.

Yet, Lumian’s main concern wasn’t the playful antics but the malevolent presence that loomed over the sofas.

This sinister entity refused to dissipate, even after failing to infiltrate Lumian. It hovered in the air, exuding an impatient, bloodthirsty, and irritable aura.

Lumian suspected a connection between the earlier scream and this ominous mental vortex.

The handsome yet pallid and weary painter, Mullen, stood in bewildered silence, grappling with this bizarre request. Painting with one's buttocks was entirely uncharted territory.

Novelist Anori and the others, having readily accepted their own missions, not only cheered with enthusiasm but also summoned the servants to bring paint and drawing paper. They even "assisted" Mullen by loosening his belt.

With no escape, Mullen reluctantly covered his posterior with paint and made a few awkward imprints on the drawing paper. The result resembled a child's crude doodle.

Observing this spectacle, Novelist Anori was struck by an idea.

"Why don't we frame it and send it to art critics? Let's see their reaction to such a unique creation."

"The painting's signature is the word 'The Emperor.' For the title… Right, Mullen, any suggestions?"

Mullen, avoiding the crowd, cleaned himself up and contemplated for a moment before responding, "Let's call it 'Café.'"

Curious, Cornell, the editor-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien, asked, "What does it signify?"

Mullen shook his head as he discarded the paint-stained handkerchief and soft paper, pulling up his pants. "It doesn't signify anything. This painting was meaningless from the start."

As they discussed, Count Poufer's valet returned to the living room and whispered something into the host's ear.

Influenced by the unsettling aura of the Blood Emperor's madness, Lumian struggled to make out the words despite his best efforts, catching only fragments.

"Lost… harm… danger…"

Count Poufer's expression darkened, a hint of seriousness creeping in.

He nodded subtly, signaling for his valet to return to his previous position, maintaining an air of nonchalance.

Observing Count Poufer's reaction, Lumian racked his brain, searching for a way to dispel the malevolent spirit.

I can't wait for everyone to complete their missions, can I? No, there's one crucial step missing. At the end of the previous King's Pie game, Count Poufer had consumed the King's Pie slice meant for Vermonda Sauron…

With this thought in mind, Lumian fixed his gaze on the untouched offering that remained on the plate. Leaning forward, he extended his right hand and claimed it.

Count Poufer had no doubts about this.

From his perspective, it would be suspicious if Lumian didn't retrieve the offering!

Almost simultaneously, the frenzied entity, radiating negativity, reacted vehemently, positioning itself directly above Lumian's head.

It emitted waves of negative emotions, as though cursing the audacious human who dared to partake in its offering.

Lumian sensed anger, hatred, and an insatiable desire to rend his soul asunder.

Yet, he remained unfazed and even smiled.

This reaction confirmed that he had made the correct choice!

Had the agitated spirit not responded so vehemently to his appropriation of the offering, Lumian would have remained clueless about how to banish it from lingering above everyone's heads.

This wasn't a guarantee of success, and it might entail danger, but it was a preferable alternative to the participants of the King's Pie game growing increasingly agitated and bloodthirsty, ultimately turning on each other.

When the moment was right, Lumian could still "teleport" away. As for the others, barring Count Poufer, their chances of survival were slim.

Naturally, he couldn't predict whether there would be unforeseen changes or new threats after consuming the offering, but in this dire situation, it was better than nothing.

For the participants in the King's Pie game, Lumian's intervention was their only hope. Without his actions, their demise was certain. With them, there was a fighting chance.

Lumian raised the sacrificial King's Pie to his lips and took a substantial bite.

The frenzied spirit grew even angrier and more violent.

It no longer hovered above the others but remained directly above Lumian's head. At times, it seemed poised to descend upon him, while at others, it attempted to tear into its target. However, it was thwarted by Alista Tudor's aura, instinctively holding back from further aggression.

Another scream resounded.

It came from somewhere in Red Swan Castle—originating from a different person than the previous one.

A moment ago, it had been a man, but now, it was a woman.

Count Poufer's eyelids twitched, and he smiled.

"It seems the servant responsible for cleaning up the earlier mishap must have stumbled upon some rather terrifying sights."

Literary critic Ernst Young and the other guests readily accepted this explanation.

As guests, they lacked the authority to pry into the castle's internal affairs. Moreover, they had gradually become engrossed in the King's Pie game, growing a tad fanatical, impatient, and preoccupied, diverting their focus away from other occurrences within the castle.

Lumian relished the King's Pie offering, savoring the intangible anger and curse like a melodious symphony playing in his ears.

Compared to the horrifying ravings he endured whenever he received a boon, this was akin to the beautiful performance of an orchestra.

Unable to vocalize itself and hesitant to invade his body, the frenzied spirit could only indirectly influence his emotions and mental state.

During this process, Lumian turned his attention to assigning missions to various individuals, noting that the participants were fully immersed in the game, their gazes fixed on it.

Periodically, another scream would punctuate the air, sending shivers down the spine.

Finally, Lumian finished the offering, and the frenzied spirit hovering above him abruptly halted.

In the next instant, it vanished mysteriously, dissipating into thin air.

While the participants of the King's Pie game still appeared fanatical, their irritability and agitation had considerably waned.

Lumian let out a quiet sigh of relief and turned to Elros, seated beside him.

“Let’s see you do the Twist. If you’re not sure how, ask someone to show you.”

In contrast to the risqué Can-can dance, which was already laden with suggestive undertones, the Twist seemed relatively innocent as long as it wasn’t a male-female dance. However, it had a comical appearance.

Elros complied, rising from her seat and attempting the Twist with a hint of awkwardness.

Amidst the laughter of those present, Lumian continued to assign missions to the remaining participants.

After all the participants had completed their assigned missions, Lumian straightened up and assumed an air of superiority as he delivered his final instruction.

“Last mission:

“Keep everything that happened today a secret. You must not divulge anything about today’s game to anyone.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Elros and Laurent, still caught up in the game’s ambiance, responded in unison, their expressions displaying utmost respect.

This compliance was partly due to the lingering presence of the Blood Emperor’s aura that still clung to Lumian.

Observing the instinctive obedience of each participant, Lumian let out a contented sigh and offered a warm smile.

“That concludes today’s game.”

Count Poufer rose from his seat and gestured with a smile.

“Let’s proceed to the dining room.”

As they moved from the living room to the dining room, they had to pass through the castle’s main hall. Lumian, who had returned to his usual self, noticed out of the corner of his eye that a few valets and maids were diligently at work near the corridor.

They were using mops to clean up a reddish puddle.

Red… Lumian’s eyelids twitched as he swiftly averted his gaze.

Following dinner, the guests bid their farewells one by one. Lumian sought out Count Poufer and retrieved the five heavy gold bars with a smile.

Count Poufer shook his head.

“Since I proposed the game, I must adhere to its rules. Do you think so little of me, believing I can’t do without the 30,000 verl d’or?”

“It’s simply a gesture of courtesy,” Lumian responded with a smile. He didn’t insist and smoothly returned the gold bars to his pocket.

According to their arrangement, Lumian arranged for the poet, Iraeta, to join him in his four-wheeled, four-seater carriage. Using the pretext of having limited funds on hand, he handed Iraeta only 3,000 verl d’or.

Iraeta didn’t seem to mind at all. He stashed away the banknotes and engaged in a conversation about his artistic preferences.

As the carriage began its journey, Lumian inquired, “Which district are you heading to?”

“Just take me to the Sacred Heart Cloister,” Iraeta replied with a grin. “I’m meeting a friend there. Sponsored poets always find friends to share a drink with.”

Sacred Heart Cloister… Lumian nodded slightly and instructed the carriage driver accordingly.

Before long, the carriage arrived at the picturesque cloister. Even in the darkness of night, the golden fa?ade of the building reflected the crimson moonlight, creating a surreal and dreamlike atmosphere.

After watching Iraeta enter the cloister, Lumian directed the carriage driver to head back to Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.

As the carriage rattled along, leaving behind the woods and fertile fields,

Lumian suddenly heard the resonant voice of Termiboros.

“A dangerous creature is tailing you; it has been since Red Swan Castle. It brims with hostility and is preparing to strike.”

Dangerous creature… Lumian narrowed his eyes, calmly opened the carriage door, and effortlessly leaped out.

Facing the carriage driver, he spoke with the remaining authority of an Emperor, “Wait for me in the nearby town.”

The carriage driver hesitated for a moment before complying with the order.

As Lumian watched the carriage and its driver disappear into the distance, he calmly retrieved the Flog boxing gloves from his briefcase and methodically donned the iron-black gloves.

The nearby forest seemed to darken, and the river that flowed through it took on an eerie blood-red hue.

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Chapter 371 - 371 Wax Statue

371 Wax Statue

A figure emerged slowly from the blood-stained river.

Lumian's mind seemed to freeze momentarily for some inexplicable reason as he observed the figure crawling ashore. Instead of an immediate attack, he watched the figure climb out of the water.

The unfamiliar man's face bore an eerie stiffness, and his clothes clung to him from being soaked in water. The latter seemed to merge with his flesh.

It was a wax statue, a wax statue that came to life!

Crimson blood seeped from the waxen figure, mixing with the river's flow before smashing against the wild grass along the bank.

The wax statue's light-blue eyes shifted slightly within their white sockets, casting a vague reflection of Lumian.

Meeting that gaze left Lumian feeling overwhelmed, unable to resist mentally or physically. Instinctual fear surged within him, drowning out all other emotions.

Suddenly, Lumian's survival instincts kicked in, fully erupting and overpowering all other emotions and states.

Lumian's vision was restored.

The wax statue, with its cold, unyielding eyes, was now less than a meter away. Its pale-white hand, dripping with blood, extended its fingers like deadly blades, thrusting toward him.

Lumian had no time to react. He raised his right palm to shield his face, and there was a resounding impact as the wax statue's razor-sharp finger collided with his iron-black Flog boxing glove, adorned with short thorns.

Where the boxing glove fell short, the wax statue's finger pierced Lumian's palm, leaving a conspicuous wound on his face.

Had he not shaken off the initial intimidation, the blow might have punctured his skull and reached his brain.

The familiar searing pain jolted Lumian awake. Clenching his left hand, he conjured a blazing crimson flame and launched a powerful punch at the wax

statue's face from the side.

Simultaneously, with a smile, he tightened his right palm, using his own flesh and blood to hinder the wax statue's right hand, preventing it from evading his fiery strike.

Bang!

The Flog boxing gloves knocked the wax statue's head askew, and the iron-black thorns on their surface etched exaggerated scratches onto its unyielding face, the wounds shifting from deep to superficial.

Despite the vivid flow of bright red blood, there was no flesh-like texture to the injuries, only layers of wax that seemed to melt under an invisible fire.

In response, blood-colored capillaries extended from the wax statue's light-blue eyes, exuding an intense, bloodthirsty desire that lent it an eerie vitality, making it resemble the living.

Lumian had chosen the Flog boxing gloves for its potency, a mystical weapon of utmost power, especially against the creature that Termiboros had labeled as dangerous. He couldn't afford to be careless. However, he never expected his enemy to be a wax statue rather than a living being.

It rendered the Flog's ability to evoke specific desires or emotions ineffective; it could only serve as a defensive tool.

If not for the bizarre intimidation, Lumian would have discarded his boxing gloves and opted for the Decency brooch. Now, with his adversary before him, he had no choice but to stick with the Flog gloves, focusing instead on Fire Infusion.

To his astonishment, his punch had ignited the wax statue's bloodlust, suggesting that the entity retained a degree of life, along with faint emotions and desires of its own.

"Good to see you're still kicking!" Lumian's grin widened.

He pulled back his right palm, gritting his teeth through the pain, and his fiery fist realigned the wax statue's head.

The wax statue, its bloodthirsty desires now heightened, showed no inclination to increase the distance between them. It resumed its intimidating tactics, instinctively and desperately engaging in close combat with Lumian.

This played perfectly into Lumian's strategy. His iron-black boxing gloves, ablaze with crimson flames, consistently clashed with the wax statue's limbs, fists, shoulders, torso, and head in rapid, precise succession.

Each punch lacked brute force; what Lumian needed was a relentless onslaught.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bang! Bang! Bang! Lumian's fists, adorned with the Flog gloves, trailed crimson flames, effectively suppressing the agile and skilled wax statue to the point where it couldn't employ any other abilities.

His feet executed a fluid dance of stepping forward and raising knees to fend off the attacks from below.

Within a mere ten to twenty seconds, the wax statue abruptly ceased its movements, and an ethereal explosion emanated from its form.

The capillaries within its eyes ruptured, staining the once light-blue hue a vivid crimson. Cracks crisscrossed its head, connecting with the injuries inflicted by the Flog gloves.

Desire Detonation!

Lumian's relentless assault had triggered the Desire Detonation effect of the Flog boxing gloves.

In response, Lumian withdrew his fists and watched in silence as the wax statue's blood-red eyes revealed signs of pain.

Two crimson teardrops slowly welled up at the corners of its eyes, streaming down its waxy cheeks.

The wax statue opened its mouth as if attempting to speak, yet no sound escaped.

Rumble!

A muffled explosion emanated from within its body, and the exaggerated wounds extended across its form.

Crimson flames erupted from these regions, engulfing the wax statue entirely.

Fire Infusion!

Amidst the fierce inferno, the wax statue rapidly softened, its body dripping with blood-stained, viscous droplets.

Thud!

It collapsed to the ground.

What kind of monster is this? Lumian gazed at the fallen creature for more than ten seconds, his Hunter's instincts telling him that this prey couldn't possess Beyonder characteristics.

During this moment, he retrieved his briefcase and carefully stowed away the Flog boxing gloves.

Without hesitation, Lumian turned and exited the forest.

Behind him, crimson flames surged, consuming his dripping blood.

Within the blazing inferno, the wax statue had melted beyond recognition. Lumian's figure gradually faded, disappearing not far from the scene.

Spirit world traversal!

To evade the attention of evil gods and the dangerous entities summoned by the Flog boxing gloves, Lumian shifted his position, effectively "teleporting" to a nearby town.

It was a location he had scouted in advance, with precise coordinates within the spirit world.

After several dozen seconds, the forest path was suddenly replaced by a desolate wilderness, with only a few flickering flames remaining.

The weeds gradually flourished, and the figure of a person in a white robe materialized swiftly.

This figure donned a light-colored veil, and her abdomen was notably swollen. An unmistakable maternal aura enveloped her form. It was Lady Moon of the Nightstalkers.

Lady Moon directed her gaze towards the entirely melted, blood-stained wax statue, silently observing the dance of crimson flames.

After more than ten seconds of contemplation, the woman and the desolate wilderness vanished.

…

In a room within the main building of Red Swan Castle,Count Poufer, clad in a red shirt and sleek black trousers, occupied a cluttered desk. His icy stare remained fixed upon the wax statue's head placed before him.

The head bore an uncanny resemblance to a living being, with light-blue eyes and jet-black hair.

As the silence lingered, Count Poufer couldn't conceal a hint of restlessness. Occasionally, he tugged at his collar, shifted in his chair, and even unbuttoned the top of his shirt, as if the air had grown unnaturally thin, impeding his breathing.

As time ticked by, the wax statue's head suddenly emitted an ominous cracking sound.

It shattered into numerous pieces, each one grotesquely melted.

Poufer shot to his feet in shock, his pupils dilating in disbelief.

Tiny blood vessels protruded from his eyes, ruptured, and dyed them a vivid shade of red.

It was killed? Poufer murmured to himself, his astonishment mingling with suspicion.

Ciel Dubois was even more mysterious and formidable than he had initially thought!

Even if he wasn't, the hidden faction operating behind him was!

Count Poufer paced back and forth with a solemn expression.

…

After Lumian "teleported" to the town ahead, he exercised caution, remaining concealed in the shadows while meticulously calculating the time.

Only when he felt that a Hunter could potentially reach his location from the forest by running did he cautiously make his way into the town. He located the carriage driver and arranged for his return to 11 Rue des Fontaines in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative.

In a room adorned with bookshelves, Lumian fixed his gaze upon Gardner Martin, who held a cigar in his hand. Lumian spoke frankly, "I was attacked."

There was no way to hide the truth from the Boss.

"Huh?" Gardner Martin responded in his distinctive nasal tone.

Lumian proceeded to recount the events, detailing how he had chosen the King's Pie slice after Count Poufer and subsequently felt a frenzied spirit attempting to invade him. He described how he had utilized Fire Infusion to dismantle and melt the wax statue, displaying the wounds on his hands and face.

What Lumian chose not to reveal was that he had discerned why the frenzied consciousness hadn't fully occupied his body and that he had used the Flog boxing gloves. He attributed the former to an unknown cause.

Gardner Martin smoked his cigar, listening quietly, unsurprised that Lumian's mind had remained incorrupt.

Had he displayed any hint of astonishment or suspicion, Lumian would have swiftly "invited" Mr. K to eliminate the Iron and Blood Cross Order's stronghold.

With a cigar in hand, Gardner Martin smiled and remarked, "It appears that the official members of our Iron and Blood Cross Order are more favored by Poufer's ancestor's spirit than Poufer himself. However, we also instill fear in it."

Does this refer to Beyonders who have succumbed to the peculiar corruption at 13 Avenue du Marché? The frenzied consciousness won't invade the other formal members of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, even in the absence of the Blood Emperor's aura? I wonder how true this is. Why don't you give it a try, Boss? Lumian suddenly felt the urge to goad Gardner Martin into playing King's Pie with Count Poufer.

"Now, I've confirmed something," Gardner Martin's expression grew serious. "The ancestor of the Sauron family, Vermonda Sauron, is not truly deceased. He exists in a manner beyond our current comprehension."

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Chapter 372 - 372 Primary Mission

372 Primary Mission

Lumian couldn't quite understand how Gardner Martin could be so certain that Vermonda Sauron wasn't dead. Still, it seemed that the other party didn't intend to explain, so he could only give up on asking.

He was concerned about one thing:

"Does that mean my mission is over?"

Clearly, combined with Count Poufer's fondness for creating wax statue heads for friends he knew and the fact that a wax statue had attacked him, Lumian believed that he was now under suspicion by the other party. It would be very dangerous to interact with him again.

Gardner Martin shook his head slowly.

"No, you have to continue."

Holding the cigar, he stood up and paced towards the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"The fact that you became the king after Poufer will undoubtedly make him suspicious of your origins, but he will be more eager to find out the real reason for that incident. The subsequent wax statue attack was mainly attributed to this.

"Therefore, he will still invite you over to test you in different ways and extract your hidden secrets. For us, this is an opportunity to confirm the true state of Vermonda and the Sauron family's ancestors.

"And through this, we can grasp the reason for the gradual decline of this once exceptionally powerful family. This is of great significance to us, who are also mainly from the Hunter pathway. It is our primary mission now.

"To put it simply, the Sauron family is like Red Swan Castle. They've been in disrepair for a long time, but they hide many secrets. They have guards that can deter spying. What we need to do is figure out the castle's defense flaws and confirm if those secrets pose a fatal threat to us. Then, we can find an opportunity to break through the guards, bypass the traps, and take the treasure.

"Don't worry, I'll covertly provide protection for Poufer's future invitations. The risk you'll take won't be significant."

Lumian pondered for a moment and said, “Commanding Officer, you mentioned before that our primary mission is to find the true entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier.”

How could the primary mission change so easily?

Gardner Martin took a puff of his cigar and smiled.

“These two matters are connected to a certain extent and serve the same purpose, but you don’t need to know for the time being.”

What’s their motive? In other words, the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s current focus is on exploring the underground, finding the entrance to the Fourth Epoch Trier, investigating the Sauron family’s decline over the past 200 to 300 years, and securing something precious from them? According to Mr. K, one reason for the Sauron family’s decline is their descent into madness and the loss of many important members over time. Gardner Martin and I are mainly responsible for the Sauron family aspect. Are the other members, including Supervisor Olson, exploring the underground? Lumian had a clearer understanding of the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s recent plans.

This was also his primary mission.

Of course, he only knew what to do and didn’t understand why.

“Yes, Commanding Officer,” Lumian agreed without further ado.

He had a hunch that this would be an opportunity for him to digest the Pyromaniac potion and advance further on the Hunter pathway.

According to Madam Magician, the Sauron family was once a powerful faction with a Hunter angel.

Gardner Martin didn’t inquire about how much gold Poufer had offered to the “king,” hinting that Lumian could leave and await the Count’s future invitation.

Passing through the renovated hall, Lumian spotted Faustino, the butler, who was also an official member of the Iron and Blood Cross Order, leading a black-cloaked figure in.

The man was of average height, barely 1.75 meters tall. His attire was loose, and he was tightly wrapped, obscuring his exact appearance and physique.

Lumian could only determine that it was a man based on his walking posture, height, and strides.

Faustino nodded at Lumian as a greeting before leading the mysterious man through the hall and into Gardner Martin’s study.

Who could it be? What brings him here so late at night for a discussion? Lumian averted his gaze, his thoughts racing as he left 11 Rue des Fontaines.

…

In the market district, Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.

Upon reaching the second floor, Lumian suddenly gave weight to his pace, producing thumping sounds.

He leisurely returned to Room 207, ignited the carbide lamp, turned around in the armchair, and sat down. He smiled at the unlatched door.

After 20 to 30 seconds, soft footsteps echoed from Room 201.

The footsteps hesitated before showing determination. Soon, they arrived outside Room 207 and gently knocked on the door.

“Please come in,” Lumian said, raising his chin slightly.

As expected, it was Laurent. He wore a linen shirt and black pants, completely different from whenever he headed out.

After closing the door, Laurent looked at Lumian and said, “Monsieur Dubois, I wish to borrow 500 verl d’or from you.”

Lumian was taken aback, not expecting this development.

He thought the man was here to plead with him not to expose his true identity.

Unexpectedly, he came to borrow money!

“Why 500 verl d’or?” Lumian’s expression remained unchanged.

Laurent’s voice deepened as he said, “I’m about to become one of the deputy editors-in-chief of Le Petit Trierien. Although I’ll be the most junior-ranking editor, I can’t continue living here. I have to invite my colleagues to gatherings at home regularly to build a good relationship with them.

“Therefore, I wish to borrow 500 verl d’or to rent a good apartment in Quartier de l’Observatoire or Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. I want to bring my mother there and use the time to teach her how to host a small banquet.

“Once I receive my salary, I’ll repay the debt in installments. How much do you think the interest rate should be?”

This is not only borrowing money to secure his job, but also taking the initiative to give me leverage and some benefits so that I won’t ruin his plans… Lumian thought a little higher of Laurent and nodded thoughtfully.

“I don’t need interest. You’ll definitely come into contact with some interesting news, information, and advertisements at Le Petit Trierien. I hope you can organize them regularly and give me a copy.”

As Lumian spoke, he took out his wallet and counted five banknotes worth 100 verl d’or.

“Just pay it back this year.”

Laurent heaved a sigh of relief and said, “No problem.”

After watching the speculator write the IOU and leave Room 207, Lumian took out the five heavy gold bars from Count Poufer’s pocket and tossed them in his hand.

With this unexpected windfall, he had amassed 75,000 verl d’or worth of gold. At the same time, he had 2,000 verl d’or that hadn’t been exchanged for gold and the remaining 4,000 verl d’or funds for his activities.

It won’t be long before I complete the Armored Shadow’s contract and summon it again… Lumian fiddled with the gold bars for a while before leaving the briefcase containing the Flog boxing gloves on the armchair. He washed up and went to bed, awaiting the inevitable nightmare.

…

In his daze, Lumian once again caught sight of Red Swan Castle, its beige outer walls stained with aged blood.

In a daze, he walked in and arrived at the large living room where he had played King’s Pie.

Miss Elros, Painter Mullen, Le Petit Trierien’s editor-in-chief, Cornell, and the other guests who often attended Count Poufer’s banquet sat on the sofa, as if awaiting Lumian’s arrival.

Laurent and the other guests’ temporary female companions were absent.

This made the scene seem like another salon or a past one.

As Lumian approached the sofa, Count Poufer and the others stood up and greeted him respectfully.

“Good afternoon, Your Royal Majesty,” they greeted in unison.

Instinctively, Lumian glanced at them coldly.

“Oh?”

Count Poufer and the others were taken aback for a moment.

“Your Imperial Majesty!”

Lumian nodded slightly and settled into an armchair, watching as the guests settled around him.

They chatted nonchalantly, their topics diverse and vague.

Suddenly, Novelist Anori raised his right hand and scratched his face.

With a tearing sound, he ripped off a large piece of skin, revealing squirming flesh and blackened tubes.

Almost simultaneously, Painter Mullen and the others either stabbed themselves in the heart or tore at their companions’ necks.

In an instant, the entire living room turned abnormally bloody, and there was a terrifying scene everywhere.

Lumian’s thoughts raced as his vision underwent an immediate transformation.

In another hall of the castle, surrounded by countless lit white candles was a coffin.

The coffin was made of bronze and its surface was rusted. It was unknown how long it had been there.

Lumian’s heart swelled with sorrow and helplessness, as if he had lost his kin and support. He slowly extended his right hand, attempting to caress the rusty bronze coffin.

At that moment, the coffin’s lid creaked open, revealing a deep crack.

Suddenly, a palm with dark-red, nearly-black blood vessels extended, holding an extremely withered heart with some blood seeping out.

The heart was still gently and indiscernibly contracting and expanding.

Upon seeing the withered heart, Lumian’s thoughts raced chaotically, tainted with a certain madness.

His right palm felt slightly warm, and he suddenly woke up from his dream.

He wasn’t surprised or flustered by the nightmare. As he calmed his racing heart, he recalled the details of the nightmare.

Gradually, Lumian frowned.

In the first scene, most of the King’s Pie game participants eventually went crazy. They either mutilated themselves or others, but there were three exceptions. Even when the scene changed, they were still normal.

One was Lumian himself, and the other was Count Poufer.

There was another one Lumian hadn't expected: Miss Elros!

She's not as reserved and obedient as she appears. She has her own secrets… Lumian smiled silently.

As for what the bronze coffin, dead body, and withered heart represented in the second scene, he couldn't decipher them at all. He could only guess that it might be related to the Sauron family's secret.

Just like the last time, Lumian had several nightmares that night, but the clarity and completeness of his dreams gradually decreased.

Just before dawn, the nightmare was completely gone.

After waking up, Lumian quickly wrote a letter and sent it to Madam Magician while his memories still remained fresh.

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Chapter 373 - 373 Summoning the Armored Shadow Again

373 Summoning the Armored Shadow Again

After fifteen minutes, Madam Magician replied with a brief letter:

Lumian's temples throbbed at Madam Magician's response. She had conveyed a lot, but the crucial details remained elusive. While he understood each word individually, their combined meaning eluded him.

What does the Iron and Blood Cross Order actually possess and what does it claim?

Lumian massaged his temples and continued reading.

"This situation presents both danger and opportunity for you. Investigating the truth behind the Sauron family's downfall is a mission I eagerly anticipate. Mr. Fool assigned this long-term mission to our Tarot Club, much like the Two of Cups interacting with the Demoness Sect to confirm the Primordial Demoness's condition. There's no need to rush. Take your time. Even if it takes years to complete."

"…" Lumian was taken aback.

He had expected Franca's Major Arcana, Madam Judgment, to agree to her contact with the Demoness Sect. But what kind of terrifying mission was it to ascertain the Primordial Demoness's condition?

That was a true deity!

Based on Lumian's recent knowledge from various sources, not only was direct observation of deities impossible, but attempting to understand Their specific situation was exceedingly perilous.

As for the evil gods like the one known as Inevitability, mere awareness of Their existence equated to corruption.

A long-term mission… a task that could only be completed once Franca achieved demigod status? Lumian thoughtfully read the last sentence of Madam Magician's reply.

"Focus on this matter. If you need help or find yourself in a bind, contact me in advance. As for the Aurora Order, refrain from participating in other missions.

Concentrate on the Iron and Blood Cross Order. I believe Mr. K will understand."

Madam Magician had previously tasked me with infiltrating the Aurora Order and slowly gaining Mr. K's trust, with the ultimate goal of becoming an Oracle. However, it is apparent from her tone that priorities had shifted. Now, she emphasizes giving precedence to the Iron and Blood Cross Order… Lumian discerned this as a significant signal from her reply.

Crimson flames erupted as Lumian burned the letter in his hand. He slung a satchel over his shoulder and placed the Flog boxing gloves inside. Then, he made his way to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

He located a random café and had breakfast there.

It wasn't until nearly nine o'clock that Lumian knocked on the door of Apartment 601.

Franca didn't express any annoyance at being awakened this time. She didn't appear to be asleep, wearing a troubled expression instead.

Upon seeing Lumian, she tugged at her flaxen-colored hair, which was left untied, and said, "Guess what? I've accepted a suicide mission!"

"Confirming the Primordial Demoness's condition?" Lumian chuckled.

Sensing that Franca had done so willingly, he no longer fretted about her.

"Do you want to hear the truth or a lie? For the lie, I divined it. The truth is, I just reported the recent situation to my Major Arcana card holder, and she mentioned your choice." Lumian strolled over to the divan and sat down casually. "Where's Jenna?"

"Ever since she received her father's compensation, she's been keen on instigation. Yesterday, she poached a supporting actress whose contract had expired and convinced her to switch to a theater in Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative. While it did boost her income significantly, I could have matched the offer if I had been informed. Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons has been quite profitable lately."

Franca didn't hold a grudge against Jenna because Jenna had sought her opinion beforehand and obtained her approval. She believed such instigations were beneficial. Plus, having a supporting actress leave opened up opportunities for apprentices like Jenna and the former dancers.

After recounting the matter briefly, Franca sighed and continued, "Madam Judgment only wants me to interact with the Demoness Sect. Under the condition that I control my desires and mental state, I can use their resources to enhance myself, monitor their activities, and understand their immediate plans. Confirming the Primordial Demoness's condition can be considered once I truly attain godhood and become a saint. I can deduce certain situations through the Demoness Sect's activities, their recent plans, and the reactions during prayers to

the Primordial Demoness."

"Aren't you troubled by the mission?" Lumian raised his eyebrows.

Franca sighed.

"I am troubled by the mission, but what's troubling is that I'll remain a Demoness at Sequence 4. I won't be able to transform back into a man."

"You can wait until Sequence 3," Lumian suggested with a relaxed demeanor.

"That's true, although it would be even more challenging." Franca had thought it through and then asked why Lumian had suddenly reported the situation to Madam Magician.

Lumian briefly recounted his experience at Red Swan Castle from yesterday and Gardner Martin's words, omitting specific details.

Franca listened intently, contemplating for a moment before saying, "Our current missions combined involve the secrets and movements of the relevant factions within the Hunter and Demoness pathways.

"The Tarot Club appears to attach great importance to such matters…"

Lumian chuckled.

"That's the only way we'll have a chance."

Franca acknowledged his words tersely and suddenly remembered something.

"How much gold did you command Count Poufer to give you?"

"30,000," Lumian replied honestly.

Franca's eyes lit up.

"How much gold do you have now?"

"75,000. I can add another 6,000 at any time," Lumian disclosed without hesitation.

Franca's smile widened.

"Then I'll lend you 25,000 first, interest-free!

"Let's summon the Armored Shadow tonight and try to figure things out before the gathering next week."

He recalled that Franca had spent all her savings to advance to the Demoness of Pleasure.

Franca said smugly, “I received 20,000 verl d’or for assisting you in dealing with Guillaume Bénet, and Gardner Martin has been quite generous lately. He entrusted me with managing most of the earnings from Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and the dancers. Heh heh, Madam Judgment even provided me with 10,000 to support my activities.”

Your earnings are quite impressive as well… Lumian realized that while the profits from Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons and the dancers might not match those of Salle de Bal Brise, they were undoubtedly substantial. If Franca could claim a significant portion of them, she could easily make around 20,000 per month.

He nodded and said, “Alright, we’ll perform the summoning ritual at 11 tonight at the same place the other time.”

Franca’s joy was palpable.

“I’ll arrange for someone to exchange the 25,000 gold right away.”

…

Late at night, at Rist Docks, within the charred remains of a building.

Franca observed Lumian as he set up the altar and placed all the gold upon it.

Rather than staying outside the wall of spirituality, she chose to remain by her companion’s side.

Lumian proceeded to light the candles one by one, letting the essential oil drip. Stepping back, he intoned, “The Fool that doesn’t belong to this era;

“…”

Almost simultaneously, Franca chanted Mr. Fool’s honorific name, ensuring her safety in the presence of the ritual’s power.

Soon, amid the faint fog and a sense of impending danger, Lumian recited the final part of the incantation.

“I!

“In the name of the great Fool, I summon:

“The spirit that wanders the void, a combination of numerous shadows, Lumian Lee’s contracted creature.”

Within the wavering candlelight, an ethereal door adorned with enigmatic symbols materialized. From it emerged a shadowy figure clad in dark armor reminiscent of fish scales.

Just as before, each scale seemed to bear a face, each belonging to a different creature.

Those are indeed fish scales… Franca couldn't tear her gaze away, her anticipation and anxiety

overriding the eerie ambiance that surrounded them and the evident malevolence emanating from the Armored Shadow.

Lumian locked eyes with the Armored Shadow and spoke in Hermes, "I will fulfill the contract and offer you gold valued at 100,000 verl d'or."

To be honest, Lumian harbored some doubts about the 100,000 verl d'or worth of gold. The ever-changing exchange rates between verl d'or and gold left him uncertain whether he should prepare the amount based on the exchange rate at the time of signing the contract or the current rate. As a precaution, he had only acquired an additional 1,000 verl d'or worth of gold as a backup.

As Lumian finished his words, the gold bars, jewelry, and various items on the altar suddenly disintegrated, transforming into golden particles that flew toward the mysterious illusory door.

Most of these particles landed on the Armored Shadow, while a few passed through the open illusory door and disappeared.

Gradually, almost a fifth of the Armored Shadow's pitch-black armor, resembling fish scales, transformed into gold. It was no longer dark and foreboding but radiated a holy and pristine aura.

Franca's eyes widened.

Legends and terms from her original world rushed into her mind as she muttered to herself, "Could this be… the reconstruction of the golden body?"

In her memory, the golden body referred to the golden powder or gold foil applied to the surface of idol statues. Sometimes, it denoted the special form of someone with godlike status or significant achievements. The Armored Shadow now resembled a weathered statue that had been rejuvenated with a coating of golden powder.

When all the gold on the altar had vanished, Lumian sensed that the contract had been completely fulfilled.

Taking the opportunity, he asked on Franca's behalf in Hermes, "Where do you come from?"

The Armored Shadow opened its mouth and spoke with a deep, dignified, and somewhat sinister voice.

However, Lumian couldn't comprehend its words at all. He could only watch in confusion as the Armored Shadow returned to the illusory door.

Once the summoning ritual concluded, Lumian turned to Franca and noticed that her companion seemed lost in thought, her brows furrowed.

His heart stirred as he asked, "Did you understand the Armored Shadow's response?"

Franca nodded slowly.

"The language he used is very similar to the language from my home world.

"He said…"

Franca paused and muttered to herself, puzzlement evident on her face,"The Blood Son of Heaven disrupted the netherworld, and the Underworld Daoist sacrificed himself to enter the river."

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Chapter 374 - 374 Preliminary Speculation

374 Preliminary Speculation

Despite Franca speaking Intisian, it left Lumian perplexed. He struggled to grasp her meaning or intentions.

Surveying the silent ruins around him, he found nothing out of the ordinary. Turning his attention back to Franca, he inquired, “Care to explain?”

Franca contemplated for a moment before responding, “The Son of Heaven is roughly equivalent to an Emperor. As for Daoist, eh—think of it as a mighty Beyonder.”

“In essence, this Emperor, bearing the title ‘Blood,’ wrought havoc in hell, sowing chaos. As for the Daoist known as ‘Underworld,’ a powerful Beyonder, they made the ultimate sacrifice, entering a certain river to seal away this Emperor.”

The Emperor with the title of Blood… Lumian was alarmed.

“The Blood Emperor?”

Memories from the Samaritan Women’s Spring came flooding back.

In those vivid recollections, the Blood Emperor’s elusive figure burned with concealed flames, his battered armor soaked in blood. The dark waters receded within the fountain only to surge forth again, merging with the ethereal mist, transforming into a pale spring. Alista Tudor’s apparition was tugged back into the fountain’s depths by an inexplicable force. It appeared as though a fierce battle had transpired between the two entities…

With Franca’s explanation, Lumian’s mind began to piece together a new interpretation of the Armored Shadow’s cryptic words and his encounter.

He said thoughtfully to Franca, “I suspect the ‘Blood Son of Heaven’ you mention is none other than the apparition of the ‘Blood Emperor’ Alista Tudor.”

“But how did the Blood Emperor’s apparition find its way to my home?” Franca didn’t immediately connect it to Alista Tudor, but Lumian’s deductions were beginning to make sense.

The special fish-scale armor and the Spell of Harrumph, which originated from myths and legends, made her suspect that the Armored Shadow came from back

home. And now, the language basically matched, making her even more certain.

Lumian nodded, continuing, “I’ll have to start with the events at the Samaritan Women’s Spring, where Madame Hela and I fetched the water…”

“You went with Madame Hela?” Franca murmured, her curiosity piqued but allowing Lumian to proceed.

Lumian went on to recount the events at the Samaritan Women’s Spring in detail, ensuring Franca remained focused on his narrative. He then presented his theory.

“I suspect that during the War of the Four Emperors, the Blood Emperor did not fully perish. For some extraordinary reason, He preserved a fragment of His lingering soul. During the godly war, a passage was opened between our world and your homeland, allowing a mysterious river from your world to infiltrate ours. Mr. Fool sealed it, creating the Samaritan Women’s Spring.

“This river appears closely tied to the realms of death and the Underworld. The Blood Emperor’s apparition, trapped in a state of death, traverses between your world, the Samaritan Women’s Spring, and even the Fourth Epoch Trier.

“The Blood Emperor possesses an innate desire for resurrection, and the first step to achieving that is to escape the river’s confinement. In this process, He brought chaos to the Underworld of your homeland. The powerful Beyonder from the domains of Death and the Underworld had no choice but to make the ultimate sacrifice, immersing themselves in the mysterious river to harness its power fully and seal away the Blood Emperor’s apparition.”

Franca alternated between confusion and clarity. When Lumian finished sharing his theory, she responded with a mixture of surprise and suspicion, saying, “Your guess seems quite realistic and logical…”

His explanation shed light on the words of the Armored Shadow and the peculiar occurrences at the Samaritan Women’s Spring.

Franca fell into a brief silence, then continued, “Back in my homeland, that elusive and mysterious river is known as the Yellow Springs.”

“However, before I transmigrated, the Yellow Springs and the netherworld were nothing more than legends, unverifiable myths. There were no tales of the Blood Son of Heaven or the Underworld Daoist…

“Could it be that I was just an ordinary person who never had the opportunity to encounter such things?”

Lumian chuckled.

“Before I discovered Aurore was a Warlock, concepts like superpowers, demons, and ghosts were nonexistent.”

Franca acknowledged his words, her expression gradually shifting towards excitement.

“Now that there’s a passageway connecting our worlds, returning home is no longer an unattainable dream!”

Lumian, in a friendly tone, warned, “Madame Hela mentioned that the pale-white spring water is deadly to anyone who touches it.”

Franca’s expression froze for a moment, then she replied, “That may be true for us now. But with the power of godhood and ascending to sainthood, we might be able to handle it.”

Lumian reminded her again, “There are the figures of an angel and a true god imprisoned in the spring.”

“…” Franca rolled her eyes at Lumian. “Aren’t you a buzzkill! Compared to before, when we had no answers, no direction, and no hope, now there’s a glimmer of hope. We know where to focus our efforts. One of the reasons Madame Hela went to retrieve the Samaritan Women’s Spring might have been to confirm if it’s connected to the Yellow Springs. She’s truly exceptional at finding leads!”

Lumian simply shrugged, opting not to dampen Franca’s newfound optimism and enthusiasm.

Franca’s excitement was palpable as she paced back and forth before suddenly posing a question.

“Were you asking where the Armored Shadow came from? Why did it mention the Blood Emperor and Daoist Underworld?”

That wasn’t an answer!

Could there be some hidden secret?

Lumian thought for a moment and said, “It’s a shadow born after death, and some of its abilities clearly belong to the Death domain. It also has a strong urge to break free from its restraints and escape imprisonment… Given these factors, I believe it’s a ghost-like entity sealed by Daoist Underworld. Asking about its origins would inevitably lead to uncovering the current state of the Daoist Underworld, which is why I received that answer.”

Franca was enlightened.

“That makes sense!

“Underworld Daoist destroyed its golden body and sealed it. Could that be why it’s collecting gold to reconstruct its golden body and break free from its imprisonment?”

Observing Lumian's puzzled expression, Franca clarified the concept of a golden body and her interpretation.

"Is that so?" Lumian nodded slowly. "It seems like we might be able to continue trading gold with the Armored Shadow in the future, but fully restoring it to its original state should be avoided. This entity is extremely dangerous and holds a deep malice. I wonder what it will do once it escapes its seal."

Franca agreed wholeheartedly. "At the very least, we need to advance to Sequence 4 before considering this matter."

Lumian snickered. "Didn't you mention that achieving godhood and becoming a saint is an arduous endeavor? Why the newfound confidence?"

Franca glared at Lumian. "Isn't it because I have a goal now? Can't I indulge in a little daydreaming with all the motivation I have? Seriously, did we switch roles?"

She recalled that not long ago, she had remarked that Lumian made the path to godhood and switching pathways sound too simplistic.

Lumian chuckled and said, "It's good to have a goal and motivation. Yes, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's gathering is coming up next week. Should I inform the others about the Armored Shadow, the Blood Emperor, Underworld Daoist, and the Yellow Springs?"

Franca pondered for a moment and said, "In the past, I would have shared this information, but now I can't do so until I solve the issue with April Fool's Day. However, we can inquire about the illusory river related to death and see if anyone has relevant information."

Lumian thought for a moment and said, "I'll do the asking."

Franca was momentarily surprised but quickly understood Lumian's reasoning.

Lumian had gone to the Samaritan Women's Spring with Madame Hela. It made more sense for her companion, who was posing as Muggle, to inquire about the situation at the Samaritan Women's Spring. There was a logical rationale behind it.

From Hela's perspective, Lumian and Hidden Blade were strangers who didn't know each other. If Franca were to casually mention the River of Death, it would undoubtedly raise suspicion.

…

On Monday, Franca arrived at Trocadéro's Red House Café once again.

This time, she had taken care to dress more in line with her usual attire, wearing a shirt, pants, and boots, even though she still maintained her black-haired, brown-eyed form.

Her intention was to create the illusion that she was a man who had transformed into a Demoness, which she hoped would deter any sudden attacks from the Demoness she was waiting for.

However, the long-haired orange-red Demoness did not appear throughout the morning. Instead, Franca found herself engaged in conversations with two female patrons who took the opportunity to strike up a chat with her.

Franca calmly sipped her coffee, seemingly unfazed by the interactions.

She couldn't help but notice that Lumian appeared unusually calm and encouraged her to take her time. Franca understood the urgency of eliminating the core members of the Bliss Society, particularly those close to Susanna Mattise. Failing to do so would mean Lumian would forever be overshadowed by the Rose School of Thought.

…

Lumian had already reported to Madam Magician about the Bliss Society, the Rose School of Thought, and the activities at the Red House Café. The response he received was concise: "Do not leave Trier for the time being, and there should be no major issues."

Lumian ignited the letter and departed Rue du Rossignol, strolling towards Avenue du Marché.

As he approached Salle de Bal Brise, he spotted a familiar figure—a man with dark-brown eyes, a prominent nose bridge, and a flaxen-colored beard that covered his chin. This man wore a robe reminiscent of an ancient Warlock's attire. It was Secrets Suppliant Osta Trul, the same person who had introduced Lumian to Mr. K's mysticism gathering.

"My cabbage," Lumian inquired with a smile. "What brings you here?"

Osta Trul responded with a magnetic voice, "I've come to find Baron Brignais to settle my debt."

"You've got the money?" Lumian raised his eyebrows.

Osta Trul smiled and replied, "Yes, I've come to realize that some honorific names derived from the potion can be used for prayers. There's no danger involved. This discovery has been quite helpful to me."

Lumian was slightly taken aback by this revelation. With a dark look, he tapped his chest four times—up, down, left, and right.

Osta Trul mirrored his actions with an even warmer smile.

Lumian didn't continue the small talk. He simply waved his hand and walked past Osta Trul.

Quietly, he approached the white spherical statue constructed from skulls outside Salle de Bal Brise, releasing a soft sigh.

At 9 p.m., Lumian returned to Room 207 at Auberge du Coq Doré. He finally received a letter from a pure silver skull with pale-white flames burning in its eye sockets.

The letter was from Hela, and its content was brief.

“There will be a gathering in one hour.

“If you wish to participate, silently recite the following incantation within five minutes of 10 p.m.”

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Chapter 375 - 375 Gathering Venue

375 Gathering Venue

It's finally here… Lumian exhaled, folded the letter, and left Auberge du Coq Doré.

He hadn't prepared an additional iron cabinet. With a few traps hidden in the room, regular thieves couldn't approach the core area. Forcing their way in would only cost them their lives. An iron cabinet wouldn't stop exceptional thieves anyway.

When the time was right, Lumian donned a hooded black robe that bore a striking resemblance to the attire worn by Warlocks, all according to Madame Hela and Franca's descriptions of his sister's appearance at these gatherings.

Then, he pulled out Lie and transformed it into a simple yet exquisite silver-white earring. He secured it onto his right earlobe.

Gazing into the full-length mirror, Lumian maintained a calm demeanor as he observed a sudden transformation of him growing shorter. His hair morphed into a luxuriant shade of pure gold, growing thick and cascading down his back.

His facial features underwent a metamorphosis, mirroring those etched in his memories of Aurore. His nose bridge, now elevated and delicate, complemented his lips, neither too full nor too thin, painted in a subtle shade of red. His eyes, light-blue and clear, emitted a faint but captivating luminescence.

In the past, Lumian had always perceived his sister as a paradox, her inner self contrasting sharply with her outward appearance. She exuded an aura of sunshine, cheerfulness, and open-mindedness, yet in reality, she was a homebody, reluctant to venture out for social interactions. Only those who had truly earned her trust were privileged to witness her relaxed demeanor, the quirky phrases she often uttered, and her playful and bullying side.

On the contrary, Aurore displayed no apprehension when stepping out into the world. Much like Lumian, she possessed the natural ability to connect with the elderly ladies of Cordu and regale the children with captivating stories, earning their affection.

Ever since Lumian had learned about his sister's true background, he had come to comprehend the stark divergence between Aurore's inner self and her external appearance and demeanor. Certainly, many people grappled with such contradictions, but Aurore's unique circumstances had magnified this incongruity.

Lately, Lumian often found himself pondering what his sister had been like and the kind of life she had led.

As he stared into the mirror, Aurore's light-blue eyes seemed to take on a misty quality, as if she too were lost in reminiscences of days gone by.

Lumian still held vivid memories of the first time his sister had mentioned her homeland. It happened during his second year in Cordu.

Back then, when the shepherds had returned to the highland pastures, Aurore had taken him to pat the newly born lambs and, "cruelly" bought their loved ones. They ventured into the green pastures adorned with white and yellow wildflowers, carefully selecting a spot that wouldn't disturb the serene surroundings. They then set up a charcoal grill for a picnic.

As night descended upon them, and the starry heavens unveiled themselves like a boundless river of glistening diamonds, Aurore suddenly drifted into a reverie, her fingers brushing away tears.

Lumian inquired about her thoughts, and she confessed to a profound sense of homesickness.

Aurore's gaze in the mirror seemed to lose focus, mirroring the soft, yellowish-blue glow of the carbide lamp.

The mountain village nestled beside those vibrant green pastures under the radiant sun—it was a place they could never return to.

After a while, Lumian opened the pocket watch he had borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise, confirming the time.

Then, he donned a sleek silver-white half-mask, revealing his finely sculpted lips and chiseled chin to the world.

Without delay, Lumian retrieved a piece of paper adorned with the ancient Feysac script and affixed it securely to his left breast, displaying the word "Muggle."

Despite hailing from the same world, the society's members hailed from diverse homelands, each with their distinct languages. Upon their transmigration to this world, they found themselves scattered across different countries, inevitably erecting language barriers. Initially, they relied on the linguistic prowess of fellow members who were polyglots. However, over time, they gravitated towards adopting ancient Feysac, the common tongue of the Northern Continent, as their shared language.

Naturally, there were exceptions among the society's ranks—those whose native languages diverged significantly from ancient Feysac—but they were a minority. They had to follow the majority, knowing that, until they mastered the language, someone would always be there to translate for them.

Lumian had already laid a strong foundation in ancient Feysac. Ever since his arrival in Trier, he had diligently immersed himself in Aurore's grimoires, plunging deeper into this linguistic realm. Basic communication posed no challenge for him any longer.

Approaching 10 p.m., Lumian made final adjustments to his appearance in front of the full-length mirror, ensuring everything was in its rightful place. He concealed an assortment of ritual components and the alcohol flask containing the Decency brooch within the concealed pocket of his Warlock-like black robe.

With Madame Hela's letter clutched firmly in his hand, Lumian began the recitation for the Hermes gathering.

"A Beyonder from ancient times, Ruler of the Nation of the Evernight, noble Mother of the Sky, I beseech your permission to enter your kingdom."

As the words escaped Lumian's lips, the world around him underwent a sudden and eerie transformation. He beheld his own reflection in the mirror, like a pencil sketch hastily erased by an eraser.

His vision dimmed, plunging him into what felt like the deepest of slumbers.

Abruptly, Lumian's consciousness drifted to the gathering, the pounding of his heart resonating within his ears.

He snapped out of his reverie, finding himself within a palace marked by crumbling stone walls and encroaching weeds.

In its heart lay a massive, weathered stone throne, yet no one ventured near it. Through the fissures in the walls and the timeworn windows, Lumian glimpsed a night shrouded in darkness and cold, veiled by a thick fog.

Faint starlight penetrated the fog, casting a feeble glow upon the palace and the dreamlike town enshrouded by the fog.

The town appeared utterly deserted, as if plucked from a dream. Within the palace, stone candlesticks embedded in the walls flickered, bathing the surroundings in their warm, yellow flames.

At that precise moment, over a hundred figures arrived, each attired in distinctive garments. Lumian scanned the assembly but could not yet spot Madame Hela. However, he recognized Hidden Blade Franca.

Clad in her favored assassin's garb—black robes complemented by leather armor, a hood drawn low, and a silver half-mask gracing her countenance—Franca engaged in conversation with a group of similarly attired individuals.

Yet, among them, Franca stood as the sole genuine Assassin.

Lumian didn't greet Franca. Following her instructions and the hints in Madame Hela's letter, he approached the huge stone chair.

Such a crowded gathering was no different from a marketplace. It was unlikely to form a unified communication and transaction. The gathering naturally fragmented into smaller groups. Only when there was a matter of particular significance would President Gandalf or vice presidents like Hela take their place by the massive stone chair to address the assembly.

Of course, someone could do the same if they wanted to share their intentions with the entire gathering.

Aurore had been a regular attendee at the Academy's gatherings. Their designated meeting spot nestled deep within the palace, tucked away to the left of the huge stone throne.

As Lumian advanced in that direction, he couldn't help but marvel at the mystical nature of the gathering.

After reciting the incantation, he had departed from the Rue du Rossignol safe house in the market district, only to find himself transported to this mysterious and ancient palace.

The members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society hailed from diverse corners of the Northern and Southern Continents, yet they had all managed to converge here within a specific timeframe.

What baffled him, however, was Franca's never sharing the method of entering the gathering. Even if they were face-to-face, he wouldn't hear it unless granted permission by Madame Hela.

But it was just reciting an incantation, wasn't it? How could he not hear it?

As Franca had explained, this power likely stemmed from a Sealed Artifact—an Artifact Madame Hela couldn't fully control but could employ to a certain extent.

Beyond this method of convening, the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society possessed other means, although these were established by various groups for internal or clique gatherings. For instance, Hidden Blade Franca had set up a telegram group with select members, utilizing a miniaturized and simplified analyzer for scheduled chats.

Recalling Franca and Hela's rough descriptions of Aurore during the gatherings and forming his own assumptions, Lumian's steps grew lighter.

He believed that, given the unique and shared origin of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, even if his sister wished to remain guarded amidst the assembly, her relaxed demeanor, akin to his interactions with her, would prevail, possibly even more prominently so.

This was a state devoid of profound secrets.

Additional figures began to manifest, their forms rapidly taking shape in the air, akin to oil paintings successfully duplicated.

Among the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, a diverse and eclectic array of disguises flourished. Some were clad in traditional iron-gray full-body armor, while others embraced vibrant red, yellow, white, and multicolored paint, transforming into clowns. A handful sported extravagant makeup veiling their true visages, resembling wicked witches from ancient folklore. Still, others adorned themselves with monstrous helmets sculpted from orange-yellow pumpkins or relied on makeshift hoods to become pale vampires with strikingly red lips. Some even chose horse-like attires that enveloped them from head to toe…

It was a spectacle more fantastical and imaginative than the masquerade balls documented in newspapers and magazines.

As Lumian strolled amidst the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's diverse members, a faint smile played on his lips. Occasionally, he would nod in acknowledgment of those who greeted him.

At last, he reached the corner housing the Academy team.

His eyes naturally swept over the code names displayed on their attires: Pettigrew, Professor, Griffin, Eagle, Bear, Headmaster, Periodic Table, Isotope…

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Chapter 376 - 376 Different Teams

376 Different Teams

Pettigrew stood at just over 1.6 meters tall, his disheveled, yellow hair peeking out from under a face mask designed for performances. His right palm was encased in a flamboyant silver glove, and he wore an open brown jacket over a dark shirt.

As Lumian approached, Pettigrew stepped forward, exclaiming in surprise and delight, “Muggle, you’ve finally reappeared.”

Lumian replied with a smile in Aurore’s voice, “Something happened some time ago; it took me a while to recuperate.”

“Are you alright now?” Pettigrew asked with concern.

“It’s alright,” Lumian replied nonchalantly, unsure of Aurore’s friendship with him.

He turned his gaze to a lady sitting on the stone steps.

The woman donned a black butterfly mask, a white shirt adorned with a bow tie, and a long, dark coat. Pinned to her chest, a clearly typeset paper name tag read: “Professor.”

Lumian greeted her with a smile, “Did Associate Professor not make it?”

Associate Professor was a man. A few years back, due to their shared code names, they had met in real life and became husband and wife.

Both were avid Warlocks, delving deep into the study of various spells. Aurore’s grimoires contained the Weed Removal spell, courtesy of Associate Professor.

Professor’s lips bore a faint hue, and her gaunt face framed her beautiful brown eyes. She simply replied, “He’s occupied in the real world, playing host to guests. He couldn’t spare the time. Nevertheless, my presence is akin to his; it doesn’t alter matters. Muggle, what’s the matter?”

Lumian smiled faintly and said, “I want to thank him for his Weed Removal spell.”

“What’s there to be grateful for? Could it be that your home was overrun by a large number of weeds?” Pettigrew asked curiously.

Lumian mirrored Aurore's expression as he recounted the past. His light-blue eyes darted around as he continued, "Some time ago, I encountered a plant rumored to originate from the Abyss. It not only grew at an astounding rate but also possessed remarkable vitality. It emitted anesthetic gasses and devoured humans like a man-eating flower. Whenever it surfaced, it did so in the hundreds, if not thousands. The Weed Removal spell, however, could wither them all. While it didn't annihilate them outright, it rendered them dormant for a considerable duration."

"Weed Removal works on Beyonder plants?" Professor exclaimed in astonishment.

Lumian nodded and said, "But it's effective only against grass or vine-type plants."

These were the insights Aurore had penned in her grimoires.

It was evident she had conducted experiments with the Abyss Demon Flower of the Padre, meticulously documenting her findings with scholarly dedication, even when her condition was clearly off.

"This is an interesting discovery." Professor held Lumian's hand, delving into the intricacies of the Weed Removal spell.

Fortunately, Lumian had delved deeply into this spell and sought guidance from Franca and Madame Hela. Though he couldn't use it, his knowledge was sufficient for a conversation.

After a lengthy discussion on spells and mystical knowledge with the Academy team, Lumian suddenly sensed a looming presence, casting a shadow over his surroundings.

Raising his eyes, he beheld an immense figure.

This figure towered at an imposing 2.4 meters, draped in a plain linen robe. Its head was concealed beneath a hood, and in its grip, a formidable magic staff, capable of shattering the skulls of ordinary humans, was held.

It was none other than Gandalf, the president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Franca had suggested that he might have reincarnated as a middle-aged man within the Feysac Empire, endowed with a giant bloodline. He had a penchant for liquor and an insatiable thirst for mystical knowledge, yet the nature of his pathway remained an enigma. Sometimes, he displayed traits of the Reader pathway, embodying characteristics of a Savant and Mystery Pryer. At other times, it made people feel that with his physical condition, it would be a pity not to take the Warrior pathway.

High-end mystical knowledge like the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Indestructibility originated from Gandalf.

Oddly, Franca's expression took on a peculiar twist when mentioning Gandalf, as though his code name didn't quite align with his towering stature and imposing presence.

Gandalf, his visage obscured by an eerie shadow, fixed his gaze upon Lumian and gruffly extended a smile.

"You've missed a few gatherings. I was concerned something might have befallen you."

Lumian responded with pursed lips, his momentary sigh and helplessness hidden beneath the surface. "Something did happen, but it's been resolved."

"That's reassuring." Gandalf nodded in relief.

Following a few more courteous exchanges with Lumian, he made his way towards the other teams.

This was Lumian's first time participating in the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society's discussions. Following Madame Hela's counsel, he adopted a stance of speaking less and listening more. Often, he remained in silence.

Throughout this process, Lumian, now seated on the stone steps, observed those who spoke with a faint smile, projecting an aura of extreme attentiveness.

Aurore often employed a similar tactic. When conversing with Madame Pualis and the elderly ladies in Cordu, she would grace the speaker with a warm smile, making them feel truly valued. The discussion might be captivating, but beneath her apparent engagement, Aurore's thoughts would occasionally drift. She would intermittently return to grasp the essential points, safeguarding against potential awkwardness when she needed to respond.

Of course, when it came to discussions of mystical knowledge or striking deals, Lumian remained fully engaged, simply mirroring Aurore's demeanor.

After a while, Lumian found a suitable moment to rise from his spot, signaling his intention to depart from the Academy team's gathering area.

A lady, her face adorned with removable oil paint, exclaimed in surprise, "Aren't you purchasing anything today?"

Do you really need to spend a small fortune at every gathering to find joy, Grande Soeur? Lumian muttered silently and smiled.

"I have two reasons. Firstly, I've recently hit a bottleneck and am more focused on gathering the formula and ingredients for the Scrolls Professor potion…"

He spoke earnestly while analyzing the absence of corresponding requirements. Finally, he said, "Secondly, I'm broke and owe someone a substantial sum."

Members of the Academy team chuckled warmly, their understanding evident.

They had all noticed that Muggle had met with a significant problem during her hiatus from the gatherings, transforming from a well-off individual into someone burdened with debt.

However, they weren't overly concerned for Muggle. Over the past few years, they had witnessed their companion's knack for accumulating wealth.

Gracefully, Lumian made his way to the third pillar on the right of the colossal stone chair, where the Purgatory team congregated. Madame Hela frequently engaged in their discussions.

The lady was already present, albeit with a noticeable reduction in the chill that enveloped her. Under her veiled hat was a blur, revealing only a pale, yet not dismal, white complexion.

Silently, Lumian observed the discussions and dealings of the Purgatory team. After a while, he inquired thoughtfully, "Have any of you heard of an illusory river associated with the domain of death?"

Hela cast a fleeting glance at Lumian but remained silent.

Another member of the Purgatory team, a man bearing the code name Cerberus, pondered the question and responded, "Muggle, why do you ask?

"I've heard rumors of an illusory river deep within the Underworld, within the realm of hell. It's said to be connected to one of the High-Sequence Beyonders of the Corpse Collector pathway."

He actually answered without hesitation and didn't seek compensation for the intel, even though it's only hearsay and not verified fact… Lumian smiled and said, "I've recently been intrigued by the presence of such a river in both the myths and legends of our homeland and here."

He raised the topic indirectly without delving into further details.

Cerberus pondered for a moment before commenting, "This might be rooted in the commonality between the origins of myths and human thought."

Lumian tersely acknowledged with Aurore's voice and didn't inquire further.

He listened for a while longer before turning his attention to a hole in the ancient palace.

With his previous preparations in place, Lumian could smoothly blend into the April Fool's team, allowing him to eavesdrop on their conversations.

As Lumian made his way to the designated location, he quickly reviewed what he had observed and heard.

He couldn't help but notice that his sister, Aurore, had garnered quite a bit of popularity. Both the members of the Academy and the Purgatory team had shown her kindness.

While moving diagonally through the ancient palace, Lumian's attention was drawn to a man with stockings covering his head. This individual leaped onto a broken pillar and addressed the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members, who were clad in various eccentric outfits.

"Allow me to recite a poem!

"Ocean, you are all water;

"Horse, you have four legs.

"Demoness, you truly taste great!"

This isn't a poem at all… Lumian had already purchased Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles, which included jests about the Emperor having a more than friendly relationship with a Demoness. In the diary, he even commented on the taste of Demonesses.

With one step following another, Lumian approached the April Fool's team. He spotted a man with his back turned to him, dressed in a black seer's robe. Behind this figure, an ancient Feysac word was inscribed in golden paint: "Loki."

Franca had mentioned that Loki was a figure from certain legends in their world, associated with lies, mischief, and flames. This member bearing the code name 'Loki' is the founder of the April Fool's team. Although he has progressed on the paths of the divine at a pace not inferior to Hela and the others, he hasn't ascended to the position of vice president… Various pieces of information flashed through Lumian's mind.

He entered the area where the April Fool's team was, and all laughter abruptly ceased.

In unison, Loki and the others turned to face Lumian, who was clad in a half-mask and a black Warlock robe.

As Muggle, Lumian's lips curved into a radiant smile.

"Long time no see, everyone."

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Chapter 377 - 377 An Earlier Transmigrator

377 An Earlier Transmigrator

Facing Lumian's greeting, the dozen or so members of the April Fool's team fell silent.

Among them, several people's gazes and body language gave Lumian the distinct feeling that something was amiss.

There was "Bard" wearing stockings to conceal his appearance, "Hisoka" with a half-mask, vertical red hair, and teardrop and star makeup on his face, "Mad Lady" sporting red, yellow, and white clown paint, and "Ultraman" in comical attire.

Some of these April Fool's team members appeared surprised and puzzled, while others subtly shrank back. Some narrowed their eyes, and others changed their postures, becoming even more vigilant than before.

If Lumian hadn't sought guidance from Psychiatrist Anthony Reid during this time and focused on observing the guilty's reactions when they realized their victim was still alive, he wouldn't have been able to discern these differences so clearly. He might have missed something important.

In contrast, Lumian's earlier suspects, "Loki" and "I Know Someone," had more normal reactions.

The former was the founder and leader of the April Fool's team. If anything unusual occurred within the team, the chances of him remaining unaffected were slim. According to Franca, he was believed to be a member of the Spectator pathway, possibly a Psychiatrist. However, Aurore's understanding of this pathway was notably deficient. Her grimoires didn't align with the details uncovered in the dream.

Dressed in a black circus divination-style robe, Loki obscured his face with the shadows of his hood, seemingly unconcerned about being identified.

After a brief silence, he expressed his surprise, saying, "Muggle, you've reappeared.

"I thought you lost control and went mad after hearing the Hidden Sage's cram school classes, and that's why you haven't attended any gatherings for months."

“Rap, it’s rap, not cram school classes,” corrected Bard with a smile.

Lumian had learned from Franca that “rap” was a strange form of music that some members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society liked to compare to the ravings of unknown entities.

Muggle’s thin red lips curled up slightly in response.

“I did show signs of madness, but I managed it.”

In the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, this was a common topic. Many members had lost control for various reasons, turning into monsters or even dying. As a result, Psychiatrists could make a killing by treating their companions’ psychological or mental problems during gatherings.

Dressed in a white coat and wearing a bird-beak mask, I Know Someone nodded.

“Last year, I assessed your mental and psychological state. There wasn’t much of a problem, but you haven’t had regular assessments in nearly a year. You need to be careful. I know someone who was careless and overconfident and ended up in an asylum.”

This Psychiatrist appeared normal enough and was genuinely concerned about his patient’s condition. However, his membership in the April Fool’s team raised some suspicions for Lumian. At the very least, his mental state didn’t seem entirely healthy.

As a prankster, Lumian didn’t despair about the future or made it his life’s mission to seek fun. Having such circumstances would undoubtedly put a toll on their psychological well-being.

Loki didn’t press further about Muggle’s absence from numerous gatherings. He spread his hands and addressed all the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society in the April Fool’s team’s spot.

“Everyone, I’ve recently come across another transmigrator from history!”

“Who is it?” Bard with stockings blurted out, and the other members turned their attention to Loki.

Taking note of everyone’s gazes, Loki gestured meaningfully and continued, “I’ve obtained ancient texts that mention the existence of an Ancient Sun God in the Third Epoch.

“Haven’t we always been puzzled by the scriptures of the various Churches, especially the Eternal Blazing Sun Church? Don’t they bear a striking resemblance to the religious texts of our world?

“Now, I believe I’ve found the answer.”

As the leader of the April Fool's team spoke, he tapped his chest four times—top, down, left, right—as if indicating a religion from his homeland.

Lumian's eyelids twitched.

Mr. K had made the same gesture while praying to that entity!

Was it merely a coincidence, or was there an inevitable connection?

Furthermore, wasn't the Ancient Sun God the father of the angel at Salle de Bal Unique?

Loki continued in an exaggerated tone, "Yes, just as you suspect. The scriptures of the various Churches are derived from the Ancient Sun God, but they have different focuses and have altered certain details.

"I've only managed to find a few of that entity's books, but I can confirm they're from our world.

"I hope you can gather more information about the Ancient Sun God and eventually confirm that He too is a transmigrator, possibly even predating Roselle. If you wish to see the books I've obtained, remember to request a trade later. 100 grams of gold or an equivalent currency for a copy is a very reasonable price, don't you think? We're all on the same side, and this discovery holds the key to our hopes of returning home. Otherwise, I wouldn't sell it for such a small amount of gold."

The comical-looking Ultraman let out a sigh and said, "It's all rather pointless. I believe you think that this entity, who has become a deity, must have a better understanding of the world's truth than us. He might have already unraveled the secret of transmigration and the way back. But according to your information, didn't He also fail to return?"

"See the light!" Loki's lips curled up. "And I suspect that the reason that individual couldn't return is because He perished in a divine battle."

"Sounds intriguing," Hisoka, dressed in clothes with poker card patterns, suddenly chimed in.

Loki slowly scanned the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and flashed a smile.

"The information about that entity and the ancient books related to it has been deliberately erased, with only a small number of them circulating in secret. Most are hidden underground near the source of power left behind by that entity.

"It's said that in those places, the higher your Sequence, the more dangerous it becomes. It's easier to lose control. Ordinary Beyonders like us stand a chance to approach. Perhaps it holds the truth about the connection between our two worlds and a way to return to our homeland."

At this point, Loki's gaze passed over Lumian's masked face.

Is he subtly encouraging Aurore and the other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society to venture underground? Lumian maintained his vigilance against any potential "pranks."

However, there was another reason why he sensed a potential issue instantly. Madam Justice had mentioned that the higher one's Sequence, the more dangerous it would be when approaching the Samaritan Women's Spring. She had also explained the nature of the problem.

This led Lumian to suspect that the Ancient Sun God's location mentioned by Loki might be a place similar to the Samaritan Women's Spring. He knew firsthand how perilous and terrifying the Samaritan Women's Spring could be!

Inciting others to explore underground in their quest to return home while avoiding the risks himself, or is this merely a prank that could harm others without benefiting Loki? Lumian glanced at Loki's profile and deliberately interjected, "I've been pondering a similar question lately.

"Why do many myths and legends in this world involve an illusory river associated with the domain of death, just like in our homeland?

"Could it be the result of some senior who transmigrated back?"

Given Lumian's knowledge of Aurore, he knew she couldn't resist getting involved if she caught wind of any leads regarding returning to her hometown. Since he had questions of his own, he needed to steer the conversation away from Loki's direction. Finding a relevant topic was his best strategy.

This was a lesson Lumian and his sister had learned through their battles of wits and pranks over studies, homework, exams, combat, and pranks.

Mad Lady, adorned with red, yellow, and white clown paint, chuckled and remarked, "Human nature, my dear, humans tend to blend their own experiences into myths and legends. In ancient times, they relied on water for survival, so they believed there should be a river in the afterlife. Likewise, when they dug graves, the deeper they went, the more likely they'd encounter an underground river."

Lumian, emulating Aurore's tone, responded, "Your explanation is quite scientific, but I think it lacks mysticism. And if we aim to return, mysticism might be just what we need."

He recounted the legend of the River Styx, which he had recently acquired from the Purgatory team, and concluded, "I believe this could also be a path worth exploring."

Loki's face remained hidden in the hooded shadows as he chuckled and remarked, "Although the Underworld should be somewhere in the spirit world, I believe it must be closely related to the underground. In numerous folklores from the

Northern and Southern Continents, ‘hell’ is often depicted as being hidden underground.

“That’s why our investigation needs to be centered on the underground. Whether it’s the remains of the Third Epoch’s Ancient Sun God or issues related to the River Styx, we must delve deep underground to truly connect with these mysteries.”

Lumian couldn’t help but mutter to himself, You just want everyone to meet their end faster…

He pretended to be engaged and continued sharing information about the Ancient Sun God, underground exploration, and the River Styx with Loki, I Know Someone, and the other members of the April Fool’s team.

After almost twenty minutes of conversation, Lumian decided to step away from the April Fool’s team’s vicinity.

He had already sensed abnormal reactions from at least four members of the April Fool’s team. The next step was to leave this to Hidden Blade Franca.

If there was indeed something awry with the April Fool’s team, they would be highly cautious when dealing with Muggle. They wouldn’t readily engage or probe, fearing they might fall into a trap.

Their primary objective should be observation and indirect information gathering at this point.

When it came to Hidden Blade, they could play pranks without reservations. Later on, Franca could use those pranks as an excuse to locate the April Fool’s team members in the real world and confront them individually. She could win the support of other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society. Whether they could extract any significant information during these confrontations remained to be seen.

As Lumian took a few steps away from the gathering, he spotted the 2.4-meter-tall president, Gandalf, approaching the massive stone chair and addressing the group with a resounding voice, “Everyone, I have something important to discuss.”

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Chapter 378 - 378 Investigation

378 Investigation

Lumian halted and turned his attention toward the president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, who was dressed in a linen robe.

The nearly half-giant Gandalf didn't require mechanical contraptions or mystical techniques to project his voice throughout the ancient palace.

"I just had a conversation with Isotope and noticed a matter that deserves our attention.

"He mentioned that ever since advancing to Sequence 6, he's been encountering Beyonders more frequently and getting involved in Beyonder affairs.

"This aligns with my general observations over the past few years. You know I enjoy talking to every member and asking about the additional changes brought about by superpowers. For me, I've delved deeper into the paths of the divine than most, gaining a profound understanding.

"Having said that, I want to share a conclusion.

"There are almost no exceptions. As Beyonders progress in Sequence, the frequency of mystical matters involving them significantly increases. At Sequence 9, this phenomenon isn't prominent. But starting from Sequence 7 or even Sequence 6, even those who typically don't pay much attention to such matters will feel that they are constantly encountering Beyonder events.

"Let me illustrate with numbers. At Sequence 9, the assumed number of Beyonder incidents or encounters with other Beyonders each season is 1. This can easily slip under the radar during mysticism gatherings and small circle activities you participate in. It's challenging to pinpoint precisely. Now, at Sequence 8, it's 2. For Sequence 7, it might surge to 5 or 6. In other words, one may come across one or two Beyonder incidents or unfamiliar Beyonders once or twice a month.

"Do you have any thoughts or speculations about this phenomenon? Can you discern the cause? Perhaps there are fundamental laws of mysticism at play."

Lumian fell into a daze.

Isn't this the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence?

This transmigrator, code-named Gandalf, possessed a sharp investigative spirit. He was astute in noticing even the smallest details and had actually uncovered the

outward signs of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence!

He was also the one who had suggested that advancing to Sequence 9 and Sequence 8 in recent years would be easier than before, even allowing for the direct consumption of Beyonder characteristics. He had provided a more precise assessment of the increased risk.

A research-focused talent… Lumian sighed, using Aurore's usual terminology.

For someone like him, with an evil god's angel sealed within and a deity-level aura shrouding him, the manifestation of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence was so intense that it couldn't be ignored. Anyone would recognize the problem.

What do you mean one or two Beyonder incidents a month?

It's practically every week!

Including the Beyonders he had encountered, it could be said to be a daily occurrence!

However, at times, Lumian felt that the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence hadn't fully played its role. Only by attracting members of the Sinners organization and Roche Louise Sanson's family to Avenue du Marché and coincidentally meeting them would it qualify.

Perhaps the power of a boon wasn't as potent as the convergence of Beyonder characteristics, or perhaps Termiboros's seal had mitigated the effect. In any case, his desire remained unfulfilled.

As someone who had taken his sister's place at the gathering, Lumian refrained from approaching Gandalf directly and offering a substantial price for information on the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence.

Casually scanning the area, he noticed Madame Hela and Hidden Blade Franca remaining silent, listening to the discussions among members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society regarding this phenomenon.

Lumian knew that Franca was familiar with the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence. With Hela's concealed knowledge from her exploration of the Samaritan Women's Spring, she should have observed such a phenomenon.

They didn't explicitly mention the term "convergence" due to their different motivations. For Franca, as long as she didn't seek to ascend to godhood, immediate understanding of the Law of Beyonder Characteristics Convergence wasn't necessary. She just needed to recognize the corresponding phenomena and avoid risks. The specific details could be sold at the gathering when she needed funds and gained Madam Judgment's approval.

As various groups engaged in fervent discussions about President Gandalf's topic, Lumian made his way toward the Academy team.

As Lumian continued on his path, he spotted Hidden Blade Franca approaching.

“Muggle? You’re finally back at the gathering! I was genuinely worried something had happened to you!” Franca’s expressions were slightly exaggerated, but it was well within the norm for her. In the eyes of all the members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, she was known for her rich emotions and her love for interacting and experimenting.

Lumian pursed his lips and offered a smile.

“Something did come up, but it got sorted out.”

Impressive mental resilience. He didn’t react strongly when the Cordu disaster was mentioned. Franca looked at Muggle’s exposed lower face with curiosity and asked, “What happened?”

“A mysticism catastrophe,” Lumian replied, taking on a resistant demeanor.

Franca knew when to change the subject and shifted the conversation with a smile.

“Just a while ago, in the April Fool’s group, Loki mentioned that he stumbled upon another ancient transmigrator known as the Ancient Sun God.” Lumian took the initiative to bring up his conversation with April Fool’s. “Mad Lady, Hisoka, Bard, and Ultraman are a bit skeptical.”

Mad Lady, Hisoka, Bard, Ultraman… Franca and Lumian shared an unspoken understanding. She immediately grasped his intentions—take note of the four April Fool’s team members Lumian suspected of being problematic.

Including Loki and I Know Someone, who were often discussed as potential suspects, there were now a total of six individuals.

“Is that true? Besides Emperor Roselle, are there other ancient transmigrators?” Franca asked with genuine excitement.

She wasn’t faking it. She had always been interested in ancient transmigrators.

Seeing the opportunity, she bid Muggle farewell and approached the area in the palace where the April Fool’s team was located.

Lumian returned to the Academy team and listened as Professor, Isotope, and Pettigrew discussed the mysticism experiences they had encountered.

The gathering had a strict two-hour time limit, but attendees could leave at any moment. They simply needed to recite an incantation, changing the last sentence to “I beseech your permission to leave your kingdom,” and they would return to their original location.

Many members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society chose to depart early after conducting their business and sharing their concerns, to prevent any

accidents from occurring in the real world. However, a significant number of members opted to stay.

For them, the opportunity to interact with people who shared their unique origins and not worry about accidental disclosures of their secrets was a pleasure. Even if their conversations veered into trivial topics, it still improved their emotional well-being and provided relief for their mental and psychological states.

Lumian believed that his sister had found these gatherings quite relaxing. Thus, he partly attended to impersonate her and show no difference while also enjoying the atmosphere on Aurore's behalf, patiently remaining until the end.

Vaguely, he sensed that his emotions were becoming more sensitive and easily stirred. It was as if Aurore's soul fragment had risen to the surface and was affecting his psyche.

As the gathering drew to a close, Professor, wearing a shirt with a bowtie, turned her attention to Lumian and inquired, "Muggle, are you still residing in the south?"

Hmm, she's not referring to a specific country… Does she know that Aurore is in Intis? Lumian's thoughts raced as he responded candidly, "No, I've already moved to the Trier greater region."

A smile curved on Professor's lips.

"Associate Professor and I are also residing in Trier. Would you be interested in an offline gathering?"

"I'm in the Trier greater region as well," Pettigrew chimed in eagerly. Periodic Table and Isotope nodded in agreement.

An offline gathering… Aurore did occasionally go out for a few days in the past. Could she have attended a real-life gathering with Professor and the others? Different circles have different styles. Franca and her associates have a telegram group, and these individuals from the Academy participate in real-life gatherings depending on the region? Lumian pondered for a moment and replied, "Another time. After I've sorted out some personal matters."

He intentionally brought up certain personal matters, hoping that this information might reach the April Fool's suspects like Loki and Mad Lady.

"Alright." Professor and the others acknowledged. After all, Muggle had previously revealed that something had occurred to her.

…

"A Beyonder from ancient times, the ruler of the Nation of the Evernight, the noble Mother of Heaven, I beseech your permission to leave your kingdom."

With each repetition of the incantation, the figures in the ancient palace gradually faded away.

When Lumian regained consciousness, he found himself back in the safe house on Rue du Rossignol.

How magical… Compared to this, Mr. K's mysticism gatherings are like comparing my safe house to Emperor Roselle's summer palace. They're on entirely different levels. The contrast is quite significant… Lumian sighed and returned to his original appearance.

He wasn't in a rush to write to Madam Magician to report the Armored Shadow's response or to inquire about the Ancient Sun God. Instead, after changing his clothes, he headed straight to 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches and knocked on the door of Apartment 601.

Jenna had gone to visit her brother and wouldn't return until the next morning. Franca sat in a recliner, muttering as if cursing someone.

"What's bothering you?" Lumian asked as he settled onto the divan.

"That rascal Loki. I wanted to buy some information from him, but he told me others could pay with gold, but not me," Franca replied indignantly. "He said he wanted to experience the taste of a Demoness. Damn it, why didn't he drink the potion and become a Witch himself? After I cursed him, he claimed it was a joke and sold me the ancient information."

She chuckled after recounting the encounter.

"Although there's a special barrier in the gathering venue that prevents us from tracing the ownership and location of the items we trade, the essence of the items can't be concealed. Regarding the copy of the information, it includes details such as the type of paper, which factory it originated from, the model of the mechanical typewriter or printing machine used to produce it, and even the approximate location. This could provide some clues. It might help us locate Loki in the real world. Of course, that's assuming he hasn't taken any anti-divination measures, misdirection, or hidden anything."

As Franca spoke, she took out a mirror and prepared for Magic Mirror Divination.

After reciting the incantation, the mirror darkened, accompanied by the faint sound of water.

Franca held the copy of the information she had obtained from Loki and inquired thoughtfully, "Where can we find the mechanical typewriter used to create this information?"

Within the mirror, an aged voice responded, "Trier, Alone Bar."

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Chapter 379 - 379 Bold Speculation

379 Bold Speculation

Alone Bar? Lumian was taken aback by the answer.

Isn't this a little too coincidental?

Lumian's impression of the Alone Bar was that it stood diagonally opposite Salle de Bal Unique. In the basement, there was a theater for marionette shows. The lighting was dim, and the colors were dark, giving it a slightly sinister appearance.

Initially, he didn't see it as a problem, but now that he knew that the monocle-wearing patrons of Salle de Bal Unique were in a superimposed state of being "Amon" and "Not Amon," he believed that the Alone Bar, which could compete with this dance hall and survive, wasn't simple.

Moreover, he had once observed Leah from Bureau 8 entering the bar. He suspected it to be Bureau 8's covert hideout, designed to keep an eye on the Amons at Salle de Bal Unique.

Could Loki also be a member of Bureau 8, a true official Beyonder?

Or was it possible that he merely resided in Quartier de l'Observatoire and recognized the uniqueness of Alone Bar? Was that why he used the mechanical typewriter there to create a copy of the information, preventing anyone from tracing it back to him?

"What's the matter?" Franca watched Lumian furrow his brow and plunge into deep thought. After a prolonged silence, she extended her right hand and waved it in front of his eyes.

Lumian contemplated for a moment and said, "There's a significant issue with this bar."

"You're familiar with this bar?" Franca looked surprised.

This man appeared to harbor many secrets she was unaware of!

A soft chuckle escaped Lumian's lips.

"We'll need to start with Madame Hela and me searching for the Samaritan Women's Spring."

Franca was taken aback. “How many times do I need to have you give out every detail? Are you a tube of toothpaste, giving out a little with each squeeze?”

“The focus was on the situation at the Samaritan Women’s Spring, and this all happened along the way,” Lumian explained, without feeling embarrassed.

Starting from his encounter with the Islander swindler, Monette, and his repeated scares, he connected Charlie being swindled, the uniqueness of Salle de Bal Unique, and Madam Magician’s connection to Amon. Finally, he mentioned that Alone Bar was diagonally opposite Salle de Bal Unique, and an official member of Bureau 8 had once entered and exited.

Franca felt like she was listening to a ghost story. She subconsciously wanted to hug a pillow, but there was none on the recliner.

Quickly shaking off her daze, she straightened her back, trying to maintain an expression that suggested a “true man” wouldn’t be frightened by such a terrifying incident.

All this was used to torment Jenna!

After Lumian finished speaking, Franca hissed and said, “You’ve had quite the array of experiences. You’ve even encountered an old monster that only exists in horror stories.”

“It’s for your own safety. If you didn’t suspect anything when you encountered him, he wouldn’t pay you any attention. But now, if your demeanor changes when you see him, he might become suspicious and involve you in his Parasitism,” Lumian warned, half-scaring Franca.

She pushed aside her fear of the Amons and steered the conversation back to the main topic.

“This all ties into the Alone Bar. Investigating it in the future is going to be very challenging…”

Franca suddenly had an imaginative guess.

“Do you think Loki has already been parasitized by an Amon?”

Lumian struggled to follow Franca’s train of thought and responded, “Huh?”

Franca continued, her tone grave, “Consider this. The books and legends of the Ancient Sun God have been missing for two to three thousand years, and since the Churches of the Seven Gods’ bibles are copied from Him, they must have erased relevant information. How did Loki come by this information?

“While there are various possibilities, if he is indeed Amon, it would make sense. No one knows His father’s situation better than Him.

“As a child of a transmigrator, not to mention that He can obtain Loki’s memories through Parasitism, even if He can’t, He can perfectly act as our companion. You also mentioned that He enjoys deceit and has frightened you a few times. This is very similar to Loki’s usual behavior.

“And when Amon from Salle de Bal Unique created the duplicate, he deliberately went to the Alone Bar diagonally opposite to use a mechanical typewriter to mislead potential tracing. This also fits with this style.”

Franca’s bold imagination surprised Lumian. After a moment of thought, he responded, “This does explain why this information oddly points to the Alone Bar.

“Under the guidance of this evil angel, the April Fool’s team gradually felt despair for the future and pursued their own joy. It was a reasonable development for them to start targeting other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

“However, Amon wouldn’t intentionally lead the information to the Alone Bar, as that would naturally make investigators suspect Him, who resides diagonally opposite…

“Perhaps He anticipated the investigators’ thoughts,” Franca countered.

Lumian shook his head slowly.

“If it were Amon, your divination would have been misled or you wouldn’t have received an answer.

“Yes, regardless, this is indeed a possibility. I plan to visit the Alone Bar for a drink in the next two days and investigate the situation on the ground, but I won’t delve further.”

Franca acknowledged his words tersely and sighed.

“In truth, I also realize that the likelihood of Loki being parasitized by an Amon is very low. Our primary purpose in attending the gathering is to transition into a special state. In this state, the Sealed Artifact borrowed from Madame Hela should be able to detect any abnormalities in each member’s bodies. It won’t transform the corresponding object and leave it where it is.

“Sigh, I’m just finding excuses for myself. It’s not wise for us to pursue Loki without substantial evidence and strong suspicion.

“It makes me feel like I’ve betrayed the Research Society and my companions. That’s why I hope that Loki was indeed parasitized by Amon. That way, I won’t experience a similar sense of guilt. I’d be helping the Research Society eliminate hidden dangers.”

Filtering abnormalities in the body by entering a special state and attending the gathering? But nothing happened to Termiboros… Lumian wondered if it was because Mr. Fool’s seal was unique or if Madame Hela’s Sealed Artifact lacked

the ability to filter abnormalities and guard against parasitic angels like Amon.

However, he didn't voice any objections at the moment and instead smiled.

"In my view, there's definitely something amiss with Loki. It's just a question of whether it's a major or minor issue.

"He did," Franca confirmed. "He also mentioned that in such places, the higher the Sequence, the more dangerous it is. It's easier to lose control. Only Low-Sequence Beyonders like us can approach it."

"That's only a relative perspective. Did you find it dangerous when I explored the Samaritan Women's Spring earlier?" Lumian inquired.

"It was extremely dangerous," Franca acknowledged, knowing much about the matter.

And you don't even know that the Blood Emperor's apparition nearly caught me… Lumian muttered, "Searching for the remnants of the Ancient Sun God will likely be even more dangerous.

"If Loki doesn't make an attempt, he'll be essentially using you as cannon fodder by encouraging you to explore underground. And if he does try, he'll inevitably be corrupted and gradually mutate. He lacks the purification of a great existence like Mr. Fool.

"So, it's crucial to locate Loki as soon as possible. It's in both your and his best interests."

Franca bit her lip and agreed, "You're right. Loki clearly has malicious intentions in this matter. The other members of the April Fool's team might be curious and willing to participate, but I believe they're cooperating with him."

After persuading Franca, Lumian asked curiously, "Tell me, the prerequisite for entering the gathering is to enter a special state. What state is it?"

Franca, no longer hesitating, shared eagerly, "I've asked my Major Arcana card holder about it before. Although I couldn't reveal the incantation or provide a detailed description of the gathering, she speculated that it involves a 'Concealment' power based on my description and its effects."

"Concealment" power… Lumian nodded.

It was indeed well-concealed. Even the incantation had been hidden, preventing anyone from discovering it.

Franca went on, "The power of Concealment is associated with the Evernight pathway, which is the divine pathway controlled by the Evernight Goddess Church."

She lowered her voice and added, “I suspect that Madame Hela is affiliated with the Church of Evernight.”

“Similar to 007?” Lumian inquired. He hadn’t encountered 007 today, as too many people had participated in the gathering, and he didn’t know the usual attire or team of 007.

Franca tersely confirmed his assumption.

“Something along those lines, but she may hold a more significant position. She’s at a higher level and has access to more concealed knowledge.”

Recalling Madame Hela’s actions in obtaining the Samaritan Women’s Spring, Lumian couldn’t help but agree with Franca’s assessment.

Indeed, the lady possessed a wealth of secret knowledge. Moreover, she wore a black diamond ring that clearly exceeded ordinary mystical items and was suspected to possess godlike powers.

Additionally, the Sealed Artifact she had borrowed to convene the gathering was beyond Lumian’s imagination.

In a casual manner, Lumian asked, “What are the primary manifestations of the Evernight pathway’s powers?”

According to Aurore’s grimoires, the first three Sequences of this pathway were Sleepless, Midnight Poet, and Nightmare. They primarily involved enhancing spirituality, increasing mental strength, reducing the need for sleep, the mystical application of poetry, and the unique ability to induce sleep in others.

Franca thought for a moment and replied, “The power of Concealment, command over spirits, and the ability to create realistic dreams…”

Realistic dream… Lumian was taken aback by the answer.

He couldn’t help but recall the realistic dream he had experienced in the ruins of Cordu.

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Chapter 380 - 380 Bell Chimes

380 Bell Chimes

At the conclusion of the Cordu disaster, Lumian found himself not only grappling with the seal within his body and the fading aura of Inevitability surrounding him, but he had also been thrust into a vivid, lifelike dream. Surprisingly, even the investigators, Ryan and the others, succumbed to an uncontrollable slumber as they entered a specific area, becoming entangled in his dream.

During that time, Lumian, who was still unfamiliar with the intricacies of mysticism, failed to sense anything amiss. It was only later, when he enlisted the help of Mr. Poet to decipher the symbolic meanings woven into the dream, that he realized its origins were not tied to Termiboros's power or Mr. Fool's seal. It had a different source, one that conveyed protection and solace.

Ever since that moment, Lumian had tirelessly pondered the origin of this lifelike dream, but he had never unearthed a definitive answer. The possibilities were endless. However, with Franca's detailed account of the Evernight pathway and his own experiences at the gathering, a sudden revelation struck him.

The Evernight pathway, known for inducing nightmarish visions, could also weave the fabric of realistic dreams!

Could it be that Madame Hela, upon learning of Aurore's tragic fate in Cordu, had arrived too late to intervene directly? Perhaps she had resorted to employing the power of a Sealed Artifact to draw me into the lifelike dream, an attempt to provide solace for my tormented soul?

No, there's no need for her to hide this from me and feign ignorance. What's there to hide?

Moreover, if she were responsible, there would be no lingering traces of slumbering power left behind…

Could it be that the continuous use of the incantation involving Concealment powers during the gatherings somehow marked or corrupted Aurore with the Sealed Artifact's influence? When her body disintegrated, the Sealed Artifact sensed the disturbance and, albeit unsuccessfully in saving her, led me into the realm of this lifelike dream?

Yes, it makes sense. Leah and the others were compelled to slumber on the blood-colored mountain peak, situated near the sacrificial ground, close to the three-headed, six-armed giant. This aligns with my theory. The source of the dream's power is intricately tied to Aurore's fate…

Franca observed Lumian's prolonged silence, realizing he was deeply engrossed in contemplation. She wisely refrained from interrupting, allowing him to return to the present before gently inquiring, "What thoughts have crossed your mind?"

"Do you recall the Cordu disaster I mentioned? There's an area around the sacrificial ground, which became the blood-colored mountain peak. Anyone who ventured into it fell into a deep slumber and experienced a realistic dream," Lumian explained succinctly.

The more Franca absorbed his words, the more astonishment and trepidation filled her.

"Could it be that there's something wrong with Madame Hela too?"

"I don't think so." Lumian shook his head in response and outlined the crucial aspects of his conjecture.

Relief washed over Franca, and she couldn't hide her emotions.

"This theory does seem to fit the circumstances."

"Right, did you notice? The initial part of the incantation features a three-line honorific name. This implies that the Sealed Artifact either possesses characteristics of a living entity or was once alive. It's reasonable for it to instinctively influence those who beseech its power."

After careful consideration, Lumian recognized the validity of this point.

The two of them continued their conversation, ultimately deciding that Lumian should find a suitable time to pay a visit to the Alone Bar.

…

Returning to the Auberge du Coq Doré, Lumian drew the curtains and settled at the table. Bathed in the soft glow of the carbide lamp, he began composing a letter addressed to Madam Magician.

The letter primarily centered around the Armored Shadow's performance and its response. Lumian was particularly interested in gathering information about the Ancient Sun God and its connection with the Aurora Order.

However, mindful of the late hour, he decided to wait until he "naturally" woke up in the morning, had his breakfast, and then sent the letter.

At noon, Lumian received a reply from Madam Magician, and he felt a sense of satisfaction for having purposely returned to Room 207 of Auberge du Coq Doré.

"The Armored Shadow's response and its current condition offer us valuable insights into the situation regarding ____."

Lumian was taken aback by the first sentence.

His gaze fixated on the blank portion of the sentence, uncertain whether Madam Magician had intentionally injected humor into her letter or if some form of distortion had affected the message.

Drawing from his knowledge of Magician, Lumian's initial assumption was that she had initially composed the entire sentence but later realized that certain information couldn't be disclosed at this moment. Instead of redacting it or starting anew, she had employed some mystical means to erase the phrase.

Why can't I be privy to this information? It's merely another world, right? Lumian mused as he proceeded to read the subsequent sentence.

"While this is a valuable acquisition, its immediate utility may be limited, though Mr. Hanged Man will undoubtedly be pleased.

"In due time, when he deems it appropriate, he might get you to summon the Armored Shadow once more. He will be responsible for providing compensation in gold for the chance to pose inquiries.

"Let him determine the questions. Your role is to facilitate the communication, and the Two of Cups will handle translation. Oh, and do not forget to request a reward from Mr. Hanged Man."

Mr. Hanged Man… Lumian repeated the code name, his eyes continuing to scan the contents of the letter.

"The Ancient Sun God's problem is complicated, and my knowledge on the matter is limited. At this juncture, I can only offer this: He was the ruler of the Third Epoch, the one who brought an end to the tyrannical reign of the brutal ancient gods and ushered in an era of light for humanity.

"The entity revered by the Aurora Order maintains a complicated connection with Him. Understanding this connection carries risks. Consider Him as the inheritor of half of His legacy, while the other portion is shared among select members of the seven deities. This division directly gave rise to what we commonly term the Age of the Gods, also known as the Fourth Epoch."

If remnants of history, legends, documents, and artifacts were still available from the Fourth Epoch, the prior Third and Second Epochs existed mostly within the scriptures of various Churches, veiled in almost mythical obscurity. Lumian possessed only scant knowledge, recognizing the Third Epoch as the Cataclysm Epoch and the Second Epoch as the Dark Epoch.

In Madam Magician's words, Lumian sensed the majesty and allure of ancient history unfolding before him.

The brutal ancient gods, the Ancient Sun God who ended humanity's dark age, the ruler of the Third Epoch whose demise remains shrouded in mystery, and the Age

of the Gods that emerged from His corpse…

Why would such an ancient deity give birth to someone like Amon? And who is Amon's mother? Could there be a connection between Amon and the figure revered by the Aurora Order? The more Lumian contemplated this, the more he discerned problems with the Ancient Sun God's method of raising offspring.

He harbored a favorable impression of this deity, not only because of His role in ending the dominion of the ancient gods and offering humanity a glimmer of hope, but also due to the suspicion that He might be an earlier transmigrator from the same world as Aurore and Emperor Roselle.

Simultaneously, Lumian began to understand why Mr. K and the Aurora Order held such vehement disdain for heretics. The one they revered was the rightful heir to the legacy of the Ancient Sun God.

A flame erupted, igniting the letter in Lumian's hand.

He tidied up and fastened the silver Lie earring, making subtle adjustments to his appearance to ensure he bore no resemblance to Lumian Lee.

With that done, he removed Lie and slipped it into a concealed pocket.

His recent insights indicated that his transfigurations from Lie wouldn't end when he was separated from Lie. It was a flesh-and-blood reconstruction. If he wanted to return to his original state, he had to use Lie to adjust it again.

Lumian grabbed his satchel and left Auberge du Coq Doré.

On his way to Avenue du Marché, he heard the chime of a bell, signaling that it was 1 p.m.

Lumian retrieved the golden pocket watch he had borrowed from Salle de Bal Brise and synchronized it with the distant tolling of the bell.

The pocket watch would lose a minute every few days.

After a journey of more than half an hour, Lumian arrived at Rue Ancienne.

His steps led him toward the Alone Bar, and his gaze naturally drifted across Salle de Bal Unique.

At that moment, the establishment had yet to see many customers. Three guards, each sporting a monocle over their right eyes, lounged in various corners, engaged in sporadic conversations or drifting into daydreams.

A postman in a distinctive blue uniform adorned with floral patterns parked his bicycle by the roadside and approached Salle de Bal Unique's mailbox, clutching a stack of letters.

Like the guards, he too wore a monocle on his right eye.

An inexplicable shiver coursed through Lumian's scalp, prompting him to avert his gaze and continue his course into the Alone Bar.

Inside, the dimly lit atmosphere persisted, casting a shadowy ambiance even at noon. At present, Lumian found himself the sole patron.

The bartender stationed behind the bar counter was not the same individual as before. Instead, it was Leah, the Bureau 8 investigator, whom Lumian recognized!

She was attired in a white shirt, a bow tie, and a black knee-length dress. Her hair had been elegantly tied into a simple bun, adorned with tiny silver bells—a departure from her previous appearance, exuding a distinct charm.

"Gin on the rocks," Lumian stated as he settled onto a barstool at the counter, tapping the surface lightly.

A chuckle escaped him as he continued, "Why do we have a new bartender?"

Leah cast a playful glance in his direction and quipped, "Monsieur, there's no strict rule that dictates a bar must employ only one bartender. That would surely lead to their exhaustion."

"Fair enough," Lumian agreed, paying eight licks for his drink and patiently awaiting the arrival of his iced gin.

After savoring his beverage for nearly ten minutes, he casually inquired, "Is there a typewriter available here? I've just remembered a document I need to complete."

Leah, wiping a glass, responded, "In the room next to the theater in the cellar, there's a typewriter reserved for scripts. It costs 2 licks and 1 coppet for each sheet of paper."

"That's quite pricey…" Lumian muttered as he rose and entered the cellar with his glass of gin.

He steered clear of the marionette theater, harboring some lingering unease from his previous encounter. Instead, he ventured into a nearby room.

There was indeed a brass mechanical typewriter here, and a man engrossed in reading a newspaper beside it.

Lumian, in line with his prior preparations, proceeded to type out a brief document.

Some of the worn letters on the typewriter matched the information provided by Loki with uncanny precision.

Satisfied with his work, Lumian offered payment to the silent man for his use of the typewriter and paper before promptly exiting the somewhat eerie basement room.

As he returned to the bar's lobby, he was abruptly met with fugue, as he heard the faint chime of a bell.

Lumian swiftly regained his composure and directed his gaze towards Leah, noticing that she displayed no signs of alarm or surprise.

"Did you hear the bell?" Lumian inquired, placing his glass on the bar counter.

Leah furrowed her brow. "The hour has not yet struck. Why would the bell toll?"

Suppressing his bewilderment, Lumian finished his drink and departed the Alone Bar.

While passing Salle de Bal Unique, he observed that only two guards with monocles remained stationed at the entrance. The postman was conspicuously absent.

Without further ado, Lumian continued down the street, putting distance between himself and the establishment.

As he boarded a public carriage headed back to the market district, the clock chimed two o'clock with impeccable precision. Instinctively, Lumian retrieved his pocket watch, opening it to check the time.

To his astonishment, the pocket watch, which he had meticulously calibrated just an hour earlier, had once again slowed down.

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Chapter 381 - 381 Elimination

381 Elimination

Lumian carefully examined the pocket watch, ensuring that there were no mechanical issues.

Ever since I calibrated my pocket watch, the only odd occurrence had been the fugue state and the faint ringing of a bell when I left the Alone Bar. Additionally, there is one less monocle-wearing guard at the entrance of Salle de Bal Unique. Could there be a connection between these events and the sudden one-minute slowdown of my pocket watch? Lumian pondered this seriously, trying to come up with possible explanations.

He planned to write and inquire with Madam Magician once he returned to the market district.

Normally, he wouldn't bother his Major Arcana card holder with such minor issues, but the pocket watch's abnormality had likely started on Rue Ancienne. Moreover, there had been changes in Salle de Bal Unique's Amons. These were reasons to be cautious.

Lumian stowed his pocket watch away. When the public carriage came to a stop, he swiftly disembarked and turned into a nearby street, keeping a vigilant eye on the people and animals passing by.

He changed public carriages three times, each leading to different destinations, attempting to identify and elude any potential pursuers.

This was the self-cultivation of a Hunter.

After completing this elaborate process, Lumian entered a department store. He placed the satchel containing the Flog boxing gloves in a public washroom cubicle, put on his Lie earring, and reverted to his original appearance.

He also swapped his brown jacket for a dark vest that he had kept in his satchel, transforming himself back into Ciel Dubois as he returned to Le Marché du Quartier du Gentleman.

Lumian breathed a sigh of relief after sending the letter to Madam Magician, detailing his experiences with the fugue state, the faint bell chimes, and the alterations in Salle de Bal Unique's guards.

Whenever he visited Rue Ancienne, even though he never encountered a genuine disaster, he always felt an unsettling and inexplicable fear gripping his heart.

The puppet messenger swiftly returned with a reply from Madam Magician.

“Your instincts are keen and accurate.

“The fugue you experienced and the bell chimes you heard were the result of Mr. Fool’s Angel of Time. He located his target and obliterated Salle de Bal Unique along with all the Amons in Trier. The reason your pocket watch slowed down by a minute was also a consequence of this clash.

“In the near future, you needn’t concern yourself with what Amon might do to you. Nevertheless, you should be aware that dealing with such a Mythical Creature is far from simple, and they cannot be completely annihilated. There are still numerous Amons lurking in the various countries of the Northern and Southern Continents, and a few might even be concealed beneath Trier, beyond the reach of angelic powers.”

As Lumian read Madam Magician’s response, he was momentarily stunned.

That brief fugue he had experienced indicated a battle on an angelic scale?

Had he not recently calibrated his pocket watch, he might not have gathered any substantial evidence!

And if it weren’t for the angelic Termiboros sealed within him, he might have suffered the same fate as Leah—unable to hear the bell or even be in a fugue state!

Is this the might of an angel? The confrontation between the Angel of Time and Amon had not affected the ordinary people in the vicinity. Otherwise, the residents of Rue Ancienne would have died without even realizing it…

Once one crosses the threshold into divinity, their array of abilities take on a mystical quality. The Circle Inhabitant’s repetitive loop, the Concealment power of the Evernight pathway, Madam Magician’s Door of Starlight, and now the Angel of Time’s bell chimes—all of these surpass my wildest imagination… For the first time, Lumian didn’t long for the power of a High-Sequence Beyonder solely to resurrect his sister.

Lumian’s spirits lifted at the prospect of no longer living in fear of Amons suddenly emerging from the shadows and thrusting him into peril. He offered genuine praise to Mr. Fool and the Angel of Time, as well as his Major Arcana card holder, Madam Magician.

With a sense of relief, he incinerated the reply and made his way to Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Franca was waiting for his return with information about the Alone Bar and Loki.

“Good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear?” he inquired, still grinning, as he closed the door.

Franca sized him up.

“You seem rather cheerful…

“The good news is that you’ve found leads on Loki?

“The bad news is that we lack the strength to continue investigating?”

“Neither.” Lumian seized Franca’s reclining chair.

Franca was taken aback. She hadn’t expected Lumian to be so shameless.

Before Franca could voice her surprise, Lumian continued, “The good news is that Mr. Fool’s Angel of Time has taken action. Salle de Bal Unique and all of Trier’s Amons have been wiped out. If Loki shows up at the next gathering, it means he hasn’t been Parasitized by an Amon.”

“The bad news is that the copy of the information you bought was indeed created using a mechanical typewriter in the cellar of the Alone Bar. However, we can’t continue our investigation while in Bureau 8’s territory. I’m quite certain that it’s Bureau 8’s stronghold.”

Leah was already working there as a bartender.

Franca’s expression shifted between excitement and concern.

“Did you see Mr. Fool’s Angel of Time? But why didn’t I sense any obvious developments in Trier…

“Indeed, whether Loki is a member of Bureau 8 or not, asking directly about anyone who has recently used that mechanical typewriter will result in us being targeted by Bureau 8. And finding an excuse to use that typewriter to attempt divination with the last user might point to some members of Bureau 8 or even saints.

“There must be a High-Sequence Beyonder overseeing Bureau 8’s stronghold diagonally opposite Salle de Bal Unique!”

Franca, her attention diverted to serious matters, forgot to ask Lumian to leave her exclusive seat.

Lumian recounted the minute delay in his pocket watch and Madam Magician’s reply, leaving Franca amazed and fascinated.

After mentioning the Angel of Time, Lumian pondered for a moment and said, “Loki didn’t conceal his appearance well at the gathering. I suspect he possesses abilities similar to Niese Face or Lie.”

Franca nodded.

“If he’s truly an official member of Bureau 8, I believe he’s a Beyonder of the Seer pathway. He’s at least a Sequence 6 Faceless. Your Lie corresponds to this Sequence. Yes, many Beyonders in Bureau 8 are from the Seer pathway.”

Above Magician is Faceless? After Lumian obtained Lie, he suspected that it belonged to the Seer pathway, but he didn’t know the corresponding Sequence name.

After Lumian conversed with Franca about the Seer pathway, the two of them fell into a dilemma about how to find Loki in reality.

Just then, brisk footsteps echoed upstairs before Jenna opened the door to Apartment 601.

She glanced at Lumian, who was sitting in the recliner, and Franca, who was standing beside him, and asked in confusion, “What are you guys talking about?”

“We’re pondering over a conundrum,” Lumian clarified, informing Jenna that he and Franca were in trouble tracking an enemy with the code name Loki. Finally, he asked, “Any ideas?”

Jenna shook her head in amusement. “You’ve rejected all the solutions I can think of.”

Without waiting for her companions to speak, she said thoughtfully, “Ciel, put yourself in Loki’s shoes. Think of yourself as someone who likes to tease others. Think of everything that happened from their perspective and see if you can find any clues. Don’t you also like pranks? You should have something in common with them.”

My pranks are quite different from theirs… Lumian didn’t say it out loud. He tried to recall his motives, thoughts, and changes in mentality during the pranks to analyze the actions and motives of the April Fool’s team.

After a moment, he furrowed his brow.

“All pranks are meant to bring joy when the target is embarrassed or suffers a blow. Those people used my sister as a target for pranks, but they can’t confirm the final outcome, so it’s difficult for them to obtain true joy…

“Similarly, how are they going to track Franca’s movements and witness her tragic end by instigating her to explore the underground? You have to know that even if Franca never goes to the mysticism gathering again, she might have encountered an accident due to something else.”

The three people in the room pondered this question.

If a prankster failed to witness the end of a prank, they would lack a sense of accomplishment and the expected joy. How could Loki and the others determine Aurore or Franca’s encounter?

After a while, Lumian said in a deep voice, “Either the prank is a cover-up, and they have an ulterior motive, or they have a way to monitor the corresponding target.”

Franca suddenly felt a chill down her spine and subconsciously surveyed the room.

“What way?” Jenna asked on her behalf.

Lumian shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. This might be a lead.”

Amidst the alternations between silence and discussion, the three of them couldn’t come up with an answer, so they could only put this matter aside for the time being.

On his way back to Salle de Bal Brise, Lumian gazed at the afternoon sun and probed, “Temiboros, can I find Loki through the Prophecy Spell?”

Termiboros’s magnificent voice resounded, “After you left Rue Ancienne, if you hadn’t done any anti-tracking, you would have encountered Loki.”

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Chapter 382 - 382 Seizing the Opportunity

382 Seizing the Opportunity

If I hadn't used anti-tracking, I would have encountered Loki? Lumian was taken aback by Termiboros's response.

Lumian's mind raced as he dissected the information in that sentence.

After leaving Rue Ancienne, Loki had been tailing him for some time!

The source of the copied information had been a trap!

This noon, Loki had been at the Alone Bar!

He deliberately chose the Alone Bar's mechanical typewriter to make a copy of the information. His plan was that anyone chasing him would discover it, allowing him to start tracking the other party, aiming for a lethal strike.

And if the pursuer turned out to be formidable, he could ensure his basic safety by being inside Bureau 8's stronghold. He wouldn't be easily discovered. He could even manipulate Bureau 8, an official organization, to go after the other party.

With this in mind, Lumian felt a mixture of regret and relief.

Regrettably, he hadn't spotted Loki's pursuit after leaving Rue Ancienne until the anti-tracking process was finished. This meant he had "missed" the founder of the April Fool's team. He could have had the chance to discuss Muggle-related matters with him.

But Lumian was also relieved because he wasn't prepared. If he had discovered Loki and was forced to act prematurely, there was a high chance he would have met a tragic end. After all, according to Franca's description, a Sequence 7 Magician possessed many bizarre abilities. As a Marionettist, they could silently eliminate others.

If Loki had launched a surprise attack, Lumian wasn't sure if he would have had the opportunity to use Mr. K's finger. He also wasn't sure if he could have located the real Loki in time and escaped with the Spell of Harrumph.

However, at this moment, regret outweighed relief in his heart.

Lumian's pace toward Salle de Bal Brise involuntarily slowed. He recalled his experience at the Alone Bar at noon.

The bar was dimly lit, and it was well past lunchtime. Besides a couple of inebriated patrons chatting by the window, Leah, disguised as a bartender, appeared to be the only one on the first floor.

From the cellar, which doubled as a marionette theater, he could occasionally hear conversations from different people.

In the room with the mechanical typewriter, a man was reading a newspaper. He remained silent, his gaze fixed on the newspaper. Even when collecting the typing fee, he merely nodded…

Which one of them was Loki? Lumian stopped diagonally across from Salle de Bal Brise, his gaze unfocused.

Clearly, Leah couldn't be Loki. It wasn't due to gender differences but rather her lack of Sequence. According to Franca, Loki had a habit of revealing his appearance as of last year or even earlier. It was suspected that he had advanced to Faceless, and Leah was only a Sequence 7 Magician a few months ago.

In the lifelike dream, she likely couldn't conceal her specific Sequence.

Lumian's suspicion gradually settled on the man who was engrossed in reading the newspaper and watching the typewriter.

Lumian carefully recalled the man's appearance and realized he was entirely unremarkable. He was in his thirties, with black hair, blue eyes, and an average appearance, dressed in a plain black suit like any common clerk.

But if a Marionettist can control people, can they also turn rats, cockroaches, bedbugs, and other creatures into marionettes?

In that case, the possibilities are endless. Every living thing in the Alone Bar could potentially be Loki…

How could I ever hope to find him? What a vexing individual. Though his manifestations differed from those of the Amons, they are equally vexing!

It's only thanks to the angel trapped within me, Mr. Fool's seal, and the Blood Emperor's aura that I could evade a Marionettist—a Seer Beyonder—so far. Relying solely on anti-tracking and Lie likely wouldn't be enough to escape Loki's grasp…

How frustrating. The Alone Bar is Bureau 8's stronghold. I can't simply flush the real Loki out with a broad sweep… The more Lumian contemplated it, the more exasperated he became.

Having successfully eluded pursuit, it seemed nearly impossible to bait Loki with a similar ploy. Anyone with a modicum of intelligence would smell a trap in this recurring situation.

What's worse, frequent visits to the Alone Bar would undoubtedly attract Bureau 8's attention, further complicating matters.

Lumian took a deep breath, exhaling slowly, forcing himself to regain his composure.

He concentrated on his analysis of Loki.

According to Anthony's theory, Loki and most members of the April Fool's team have high opinions of themselves. Otherwise, after experiencing despair for the future, they wouldn't seek solace in pranks. They would indulge in their desires and the pleasures of life…

Is it possible to lure such a person into a trap they believe they had outsmarted?

Lumian dismantled and reassembled various pieces of information in his mind, searching for a viable solution.

His frustration grew, and he longed to storm into the Alone Bar and eliminate everyone except Leah.

Then, an idea struck Lumian.

While it might not form a direct plan against Loki, it could serve as a means to probe the situation at the Alone Bar, uncover exploitable details, and gather information. Additionally, it would provide an outlet for his emotions and anger, and perhaps even earn him some money.

After careful consideration, Lumian turned around and made his way towards Rue Anarchie.

…

Auberge du Coq Doré, Room 401.

Lumian pushed open the unlatched door, where he found the bankrupt merchant, Fitz, sitting at a wooden table, dipping a long, stick-like rye bread into a thick, sticky soup.

Fitz glanced back, placing the food aside, and stood up, clearly confused and somewhat panicked.

"Monsieur Ciel, what's the matter?"

The bankrupt merchant's brown hair appeared greasy, yet he stubbornly maintained a semblance of tidiness. His dark-brown eyes and smile lines gave him

a naturally ingratiating appearance.

In contrast to their previous encounter, Fitz's clothes now bore a bit of dirt, as if he hadn't had the time to clean them.

"Can you provide evidence that Timmons owes you 100,000 verl d'or? The owner of Salle de Bal Unique."

Fitz's eyes lit up.

"Yes! I have a contract for our joint venture. It clearly states that he agreed to repurchase his shares within a specified time frame, along with paying me 100,000 verl d'or and the corresponding profits.

"Monsieur Ciel, you don't need to use Salle de Bal Unique to jog my memory about Timmons. I curse that scoundrel a hundred times a day!

"Monsieur Ciel, do you believe there's a chance of recovering my money?"

Lumian's lips curled up.

"This could be your once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If you miss it, you may never see that money again."

Salle de Bal Unique was at its most vulnerable!

Without the Amons, it was now inhabited solely by humans with varying degrees of mutation!

Fitz was a mix of excitement and apprehension upon hearing this. He hastily retrieved the valuable contract and handed it over to Lumian.

While he didn't entirely trust the mob leader, he had no choice but to place his hopes in him, praying that Lumian would return with good news.

…

Quartier de l'Observatoire, Rue Ancienne.

Lumian changed his appearance and clothes. He walked towards Salle de Bal Unique in a shirt, vest, top hat, and thin formal suit.

He encountered a guard sporting a monocle on his right eye and dressed in a short black suit, who obstructed his path.

"Monsieur, you must wear a monocle to enter our dance hall."

Lumian responded with a smile.

"Monette introduced me here. He mentioned that I don't need to wear a monocle on my right eye, like you gentlemen."

The two guards exchanged meaningful glances and exchanged knowing smiles.

“Then it’s not an issue.”

From their appearances, it seems they are well aware of the consequences of being invited by Monette. They might even have been influenced by Monette’s devious personality and secretly are faithful to Amon. Unfortunately, they remain oblivious to the fact that Salle de Bal Unique is no longer the same as they remembered. Lumian sneered inwardly and decided to seek out someone most resembling Amon later, intent on shattering their monocle with a punch.

This act was both a release of his pent-up anger and fear from being manipulated and intimidated by Amon, and a means to catch the attention of the Alone Bar. After all, how would they know that someone could reclaim the money from Timmons?

It was already evening, and gas wall lamps and stained-glass chandeliers illuminated Salle de Bal Unique’s dance hall.

Dancers in monocles and short suits swayed on the dance floor while others leaned against the railings with glasses of wine, wearing smiles as they observed others dancing. Musicians played violins and the clarinet in one corner, contributing to the lively atmosphere.

It appeared as though nothing unusual had occurred here.

After observing for a while, Lumian made his way to the stairs leading to the second floor.

The guard with a monocle, stationed at the top of the stairs, extended his right hand to block Lumian’s path.

He asked with an inscrutable smile, “Who are you here to see?”

Lumian maintained a relaxed demeanor as he replied, “I’m here to collect some debts from Timmons.”

“Then you can’t proceed upstairs,” the monocled guard retorted, his tone almost amused, as if he were witnessing a comedy.

Lumian’s lips curled into a radiant smile.

Bang!

His left fist connected with the guard’s face, sending the monocle flying. It crashed to the ground with a resounding crack.

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Chapter 383 - 383 “Forced Storming”

383 “Forced Storming”

Amidst the sound of the monocle falling and sliding, the guard tilted his head, surprise and confusion crossing his face.

His reaction was rather bizarre. He didn’t react with anger or call for backup. It was as though he considered what had just happened a part of some performance filled with mystery.

Lumian passed by with a smile, heading up the stairs without a second glance.

The guard’s expression flickered, but he eventually gave up trying to intervene.

Still filled with puzzlement and thought, his eyes darted around, and a strange, anticipatory grin played on his lips, as if he expected something thrilling.

As Lumian reached the second floor, the two guards with monocles simply watched him pass without hindrance. They wore similar enigmatic and expectant smiles.

No Low-Sequence Beyonders? Lumian muttered, disappointed.

He had braced himself for a confrontation, something to showcase for the Alone Bar across the street. But, to his surprise, the other fake Amons in the Salle de Bal Unique were just regular folks. None of them seemed inclined to engage with him.

It made sense, though. Amon wasn’t like Mr. Fool or the Great Mother, capable of granting large-scale boons to believers. As for the Low- and Mid-Sequence Beyonders, they had likely been dealt with. In the undetectable angelic struggle, they might have been eliminated.

The remaining individuals probably had no idea that the dance hall had turned unusual, and many of their colleagues had vanished without a trace. They likely believed that Lumian was about to join them or go mad from some sort of prank.

With no imposter Amon to confront, Lumian had no option but to improvise and enact the situation himself.

He pulled his revolver from its holster and nonchalantly fired at the rooms on both sides of the corridor.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Each bullet hit a window with precision, the shattering glass echoing through the hall, accompanied by gunshots.

The second-floor guards were both surprised and perplexed by Lumian's actions. They suspected that he had been repeatedly fooled by a coworker, leading to a mental breakdown.

Otherwise, why would he be taking on the air and windows?

Instinctively, the guards raised their right hands to adjust their monocles in their eyes. Their expressions became increasingly eager, as if they were anticipating the climax of this thriller.

Go, confront the iceberg beneath the sea and the fear lurking in the darkness!

After firing four shots, Lumian reached the largest office.

He pushed the slightly ajar door open and found a man seated behind a massive wooden desk.

The man had a wide forehead and narrow cheeks. His dark, slightly curly hair framed his face, and his light-blue eyes seemed unfocused.

He also sported a crystal-like monocle over his right eye and wore a loose, comfortable black robe.

"Timmons?" Lumian inquired, entering with a furrowed brow.

The man snapped out of his daze and responded with a sense of disappointment, as if he had lost something precious.

"I'm Timmons."

"You're not dead yet?" Lumian asked, both surprised and amused.

As far as he knew, the other members of Salle de Bal Unique were in a state of being Amon and not Amon. However, Timmons, the boss here, must have been deeply parasitized. Such a person should have perished in the angelic-level battle, losing his life.

But that wasn't the case.

Timmons glanced at Lumian, maintaining the frustration and emptiness of someone who had lost their soul.

"Many people wish me dead, but they don't seem to have the power to curse me.

"Perhaps I'm already dead. All that's left is a shell."

“That’s not important. What matters is that you return my client’s 110,000 verl d’or, along with the interest,” Lumian stated as he retrieved the contract from his satchel with his left hand, courtesy of the bankrupt merchant, Fitz.

He anticipated Timmons’ rejection of his request and an ensuing confrontation.

Timmons shook off his despondency, raised a hand to his forehead, and smiled.

“There’s cash and accessories in the safe. Help yourself. The password is 010103.”

“I thought you’d put up a fight.” Lumian sighed in disappointment.

Timmons gazed at the revolver in Lumian’s hand and remarked, “I’m just a swindler, not a miser. I can swindle others again when I’m out of money. But if I’m dead, there’s nothing left.

“Besides, I’ve already lost the most important thing today. Compared to that, 110,000 verl d’or is nothing.”

What do you mean you can swindle others if you’re out of money? Haven’t you ever considered becoming wealthy through legal means? Lumian pursed his lips and made his way towards the mechanical safe in the office.

Three, two, one… As he approached the safe, he counted down, expecting Timmons to launch a surprise attack from behind.

Yet, the owner of Salle de Bal Unique remained motionless. He didn’t cry out for help or attempt to summon the police.

Lumian crouched in front of the iron-gray mechanical safe. Using the password provided by Timmons, he twisted the knob repeatedly until he heard a satisfying click.

He glanced at the banknotes and gold bars that clearly exceeded 100,000 verl d’or, opened his satchel, and collected them all.

With that task completed, Lumian raised his revolver, shattered the office window, and climbed out.

Timmons’s lips curled into a playful smile, one shared by everyone present.

However, at that moment, Lumian unexpectedly spun around and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

A yellow bullet grazed Timmons’s hair and embedded itself into a cabinet nearby.

The monocle-wearing Timmons’s body tensed, and his smile disappeared. His eyes were filled with bewilderment.

He even caught a whiff of something burning above his head.

Lumian grinned and waved his hand.

“Surprised?”

With that, he leaped off the windowsill and landed in the alley behind Salle de Bal Unique.

Timmons’s expression gradually shifted, now marked by confusion and bewilderment.

Inside Salle de Bal Unique, the dancers with monocles on their right eyes and short suits went about their business, eagerly awaiting the intruder’s descent, imagining him donning a monocle and officially joining their ranks.

However, amid the intermittent gunshots, they failed to witness the spectacle they had anticipated.

…

Near Place du Purgatoire in Rue Ancienne, there was a bell tower belonging to the Eternal Blazing Sun Cathedral. Adjacent to the bell tower stood a newly constructed ten-story building.

Franca, disguised as a typical female mercenary, positioned herself at the rooftop’s edge with a brass telescope, her gaze fixed on the Alone Bar in the distance.

Amidst the distant echoes of gunshots, Leah, the bartender clad in a white shirt, black bow tie, and a dark knee-length dress, emerged at the bar’s entrance, her eyes directed towards Salle de Bal Unique, situated diagonally across from her.

Before long, Franca observed gray rats emerging from beside Leah’s feet. These rats crossed the street and disappeared beside the ancient building.

After another two to three minutes, a man and a woman exited the Alone Bar, pushing their way through the guards and entering Salle de Bal Unique.

Franca scrutinized the pair through her telescope and noticed that their expressions seemed animated and their movements agile when they “interacted” with the guards. However, as they crossed the street and passed by the guards, their expressions grew stiffer, and their movements became somewhat robotic.

Marionettes? Franca speculated.

As for the whereabouts of the Marionettist who created and controlled these marionettes, she couldn’t discern it at all. The only thing she could deduce was that the effective range of this ability spanned dozens of meters, if not more.

Simultaneously, she couldn't help but complain, When there are people, they appear as 'real people.' But when there's nobody around, the Marionettist can't be bothered to maintain their facial expressions and character details? Isn't this too unprofessional?

Or perhaps it's a tactic to intimidate occasional onlookers and passersby who happen to catch a glimpse?

Franca maintained her vigil until Lumian had returned to his original form, changed his attire, and completed his anti-tracking measures. Even then, she couldn't spot the Marionettist when he met up with her.

Other than Leah, everyone else appeared to be marionettes!

Franca conveyed her frustration to Lumian, "Isn't this level of caution and meticulousness excessive? I couldn't find anything conclusive. All I can confirm is that there's definitely a Marionettist here, and it's highly likely that there's more than one."

Just hearing her account made Lumian's head ache, much like when dealing with Amon.

Could it be that they became "neighbors" because they excelled at concealing their true forms and were exceptionally elusive and hard to uncover?

"Is there no way to use Magic Mirror Divination to gather some clues?" Lumian pondered briefly before inquiring.

Franca gently shook her head in response.

"This is the Seer pathway. Unless I can directly possess one of the marionettes, I won't be able to locate their true bodies."

Lumian fell silent as he gazed at the now tranquil Salle de Bal Unique.

"Let's head back. At the next gathering, we'll gather information from I Know Someone, Hisoka, and Bard. They shouldn't be as elusive as Loki. We can still pretend to be duped and see if we can draw them out."

When the time came, Hidden Blade couldn't step forward; Muggle would have to handle it herself. Franca had already purchased a copy of Loki's information and was among the potential suspects.

"Agreed," Franca concurred, realizing that this was their best course of action.

The two of them promptly departed from the high-rise apartment and secured a four-wheeled, four-seater rental carriage.

As the carriage reached the intersection between Quartier de l'Observatoire and Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, Franca turned to Lumian.

“Aren’t you going to perform another anti-tracking procedure?”

“Wouldn’t relying on your anti-divination skills be sufficient?” Lumian responded with a smile. “Besides, after leaving Salle de Bal Unique, I’ve already undertaken several anti-tracking measures.”

Franca stared at him for a couple of seconds before letting out a resigned sigh.

“Fine.”

…

Avenue du Marché, market district.

Lumian, carrying a satchel filled with banknotes and gold, said his goodbyes to Franca and proceeded towards Rue Anarchie. Franca, on the other hand, headed back to Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Rue Anarchie was as lively and crowded as ever. Lumian weaved his way through vendors and pedestrians, drawing closer to Auberge du Coq Doré.

Suddenly, he experienced an unsettling sensation. His body seemed to lose coordination, as if someone had injected glue into his joints.

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Chapter 384 - 384 Stagnation

384 Stagnation

Not good! Lumian was both a Hunter and a Dancer, and his mastery over his body was amazing. Any unfamiliar or abnormal situation immediately triggered his instincts, alerting him to potential danger.

But in that critical moment, his thoughts seemed to slow down, shrouded in a dense fog. Each idea froze, demanding tremendous effort to clear.

I've been attacked…

Loki is really… here…

Is this… the performance… of a Marionettist's abilities?

As it nears the end… I won't be able… to think… Will I… become his… marionette?

My sense of danger… is clouded…

Dammit… Termi… boros, it's impossible… that you didn't notice… the changes in my fate… You didn't… warn me…

Did He intentionally tell me… that Loki… nearly tracked me… to make me do it again?

Me becoming Loki's… puppet… aids… Him in escaping… the seal?

I can't just… wait like this… I must resist with all my might…

Where is… Loki…?

In these fragmented thoughts, Lumian strained to move. His hand found its way into his pocket, and he surveyed his surroundings with stiffness.

Previously, he and Franca had discussed the limitations of the Marionettist's power. They agreed that it must have a certain range or require proximity. Otherwise, it would exceed the capabilities of a Sequence 5 and only be within the realm of a saint who had transcended into godhood. Those from different pathways that Franca knew couldn't resist it at all.

The duo believed that this ability either required a certain medium or could only be activated at a close distance. Just like the Ring of Punishment's Psychic

Piercing, it could only be effective if the distance between them was reduced to five meters.

Lumian suspected Loki was hiding nearby in the crowd, perhaps no more than ten meters away.

What greeted his eyes were street vendors and passersby. Some of their faces were familiar, while others were unfamiliar. They were no different from usual.

In his haste, Lumian couldn't discern Loki among them. Adding to the challenge, Loki was a Faceless, skilled in transformation and disguise.

As Lumian continued his search for Loki, a crimson flame manifested in his left palm.

His motives were twofold: first, to test his ability to resist a Marionettist's control and invasion by inflicting pain upon himself, and second, to set a question and observe how Loki would respond. By studying Loki's reactions, he hoped to glean insights into Loki's exact whereabouts and weaknesses in his marionette-making abilities.

But just as the searing pain coursed through his mind, Lumian heard a distinct snap.

Instantly, the crimson flame in his palm dissipated into a harmless stream of light, unable to form anything explosive.

Lumian spun around, trying to identify the source of the snapping of fingers.

However, his joints had become encased in a sticky "glue," and his movements grew increasingly rigid and sluggish.

This delay caused him to turn a second slower than he intended. Everyone within his line of sight appeared normal, and he couldn't pinpoint who had snapped their fingers.

Marionettist… is indeed capable… of Flame Controlling…

Pain… doesn't… help much… in the slowdown of my thoughts… and stiffening of my body… It only… marginally… increased… my reaction speed…

I can't… waste time… on such matters… The most important thing… now… is to find… Loki. Otherwise… whether I use… the Spell of Harrumph… summon Mr. K… or wait for… Franca to save me… wouldn't… significantly change… the situation…

I wonder… if spirit world traversal… can be used… If… the next… two or three attempts… fail… I'll… give it a try… and see if I can teleport out… of a Marionettist's… ability range…

Lumian's thoughts grew increasingly sluggish, but they weren't to the point where he couldn't think, react, or dodge any attack.

Soon, with his rich combat experience, he came up with an idea.

From the… current situation… a Marionettist… indeed needs… to be at close range… to gradually transform… their target… into a marionette…

In that… case… I'll make sure… there's no one… or animals… within a ten-meter… radius!

Whoever… lingers… within the Inferno Hell… shall be Loki!

Once Lumian understood the situation, he immediately opened his mouth and shouted, "There… is… a… fire!"

Crimson flames surged from Lumian's body as he finished his staccato sentence.

With his feet as the center, they spread out, igniting the fruit peels and litter on the ground.

Alerted by Lumian's warning, nearby street vendors and pedestrians swiftly gathered their belongings and fled toward the ends of Rue Anarchie upon seeing the rising flames.

Seeing their hasty retreat, Lumian's sluggish smile emerged.

Yes, you can use Flame Controlling, but I'm not going to do any delicate maneuvers now. My only move is to constantly ignite the surrounding things and increase the variety of fire sources!

Moreover, this will inevitably draw the attention of official Beyonders!

Crimson flames expanded in all directions, resembling a vibrant ocean gradually consuming the earth.

Despite his faltering gaze, Lumian still managed to catch a glimpse of a figure flickering within the flames—a figure with black hair, blue eyes, and an ordinary face, blending in with the crowd of clerks on the road.

…

After bidding Lumian farewell, Franca made her way toward Rue des Blouses Blanches.

However, her journey took an unexpected turn as she suddenly veered into an alley, disappearing into the shadows.

This Demoness of Pleasure began to stealthily make her way toward Rue Anarchie.

This was her prior agreement with Lumian.

If their initial plan of barging into Salle de Bal Unique failed to provoke the Beyonders in the Alone Bar or have them reveal themselves, they had a backup plan—a kind of "fishing" expedition after leaving Rue Ancienne to see if they could "encounter" their target.

Franca's earlier inquiry about Lumian's intention to engage in counter-tracking was essentially confirming if they should stick to their original strategy. Lumian's response had been affirmative.

As Franca approached Rue Anarchie, she retrieved a mirror from the shadows.

This mirror was a Mirror Substitution, crafted using Lumian's blood and hair!

While it couldn't be used as a substitute for death or injury at this distance, it had a profound mystical connection to the original body. It could be employed to monitor Lumian's general condition.

In simple terms, if the mirror were to suddenly shatter, it would signal that Lumian had met his demise. If it displayed a few deep cracks, it would indicate that Lumian had suffered severe injuries.

Likewise, Franca had placed a Mirror Substitution on Lumian. This precaution was taken because they were uncertain whom Loki might target after their separation. They had no choice but to conceal themselves in the shadows and continue their activities. Through Mirror Substitution, they could keep tabs on each other's well-being and provide timely assistance.

This method was more reliable than attempting to discern changes in luck, as Loki possessed formidable anti-divination abilities and could manipulate fate after making decisions.

Franca, deep in her stealthy advancement, was suddenly alerted as the mirror in her hand grew icy cold.

Utilizing her Dark Vision, she pierced through the shadows and witnessed the mirror's transformation into a lifeless gray, as if it had rusted or been submerged in the depths of an icy lake.

Ciel is under attack? Franca's heart tightened as she quickened her pace.

Upon reaching Rue Anarchie, she was met with the sight of spreading flames. Within the crimson inferno, a figure flickered intermittently. Occasionally, it opened its mouth, producing a sharp bang.

It sounded like a real gunshot, causing vendors and pedestrians to scatter in fear, believing a violent gunfight between the mobs was unfolding.

Lumian, on the other hand, struggled to evade the attacks, but he failed twice. The Air Bullets grazed his body, leaving noticeable wounds.

However, it was clear that the figure didn't truly intend to harm him. It seemed more concerned about the potential complications that injuries might cause before a specific juncture.

Relieved that Lumian was relatively unscathed, Franca retreated into the shadows and approached the battlefield cautiously. As she drew nearer, she retrieved a mirror and,

disengaging from the shadows, directed the mirror toward the clusters of flames. Her right hand became enshrouded in zero-temperature black flames.

When the figure appeared in the mirror's reflection, Franca swiftly ran her right hand across the mirror's surface.

Silently, the figure burst into pitch-black flames.

He swiftly thinned and shrank, transforming into an intricately cut paper figurine.

Among the crowd, roughly ten to twenty meters away, an unusually ordinary-looking man clad in a black suit emerged.

Lumian's thoughts snapped back to full speed, and his body shook off the stiffness that had hindered him.

In a flash, he vanished from his previous position and reappeared just seven meters away from the suspected Loki.

Lumian then exclaimed, "Hmph!"

A brilliant beam of white light shot forth from his nostrils, targeting the ordinary-looking man with black hair and blue eyes.

Simultaneously, Franca acted in perfect coordination. She conjured a transparent ice spear and hurled it toward their target.

Upon piercing the ground, white frost rapidly spread from the impact, chilling those nearby and causing their bodies to stiffen.

At that very moment, a thin-faced passerby with brown hair and brown eyes interposed himself between Lumian and the suspected Loki, intercepting the white beam created by Lumian.

He appeared unharmed, his blank eyes gazing upwards as he began to sing an aria.

"Oh, my Sun!"

In an instant, it was as if a blinding sun had risen within the minds of Lumian, Franca, and others nearby, rendering their thoughts sluggish.

Instinctively, the duo moved to evade, with one either retreating into the shadows while encasing herself in a crystalline and resilient frost or rolling to the side of the road and using the Niese Face to alter his appearance.

When the intense sunlight eventually receded, they found that both the man suspected to be Loki and the “passerby” singing the aria had vanished into thin air.

Fearful glances from vendors and passersby were directed their way. Those closest to the spectacle had shut their eyes tightly, tears streaming down their faces.

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Chapter 385 - 385 Before and After Comparison

385 Before and After Comparison

Lumian swiftly assessed the surroundings, taking in the scattered gas street lamps and their flickering crimson flames. In the distance, figures moved about cautiously, but none dared to draw near. The individuals up ahead couldn't even open their eyes due to the blinding glare of the "sun."

"Son of a sow, did they just vanish into thin air?" Lumian couldn't help but curse under his breath, his anxiety and anger mounting.

Had they fled without even engaging in a proper battle?

Did they disengage once a single strike failed?

"Dammit, were you born in the year of the rat? Slippery as eels, and they vanish at the drop of a hat!" Franca cursed as she approached Lumian, using a peculiar phrase that seemed like a translation. "The Seer and Marauder pathways are truly interchangeable. Their styles are too damn similar, aren't they?"

This was primarily evident in their inability to strike or capture the primary target.

The key difference was that the Seer pathway started behaving this way from Sequence 7, while the Marauder pathway might have to wait until they reached Sequence 4 to exhibit such traits.

Lumian's mind raced as he pondered how to track down Loki and his marionette.

Perhaps they had already made their escape, or maybe they were lurking somewhere in the evening streets of Rue Anarchie!

A marionette…

Yes, that aria-singing marionette had taken my Spell of Harrumph head-on without flinching. That suggests there's a high chance it's already dead. No active, conscious Spirit Body…

My near-transformation into a marionette confirms this indirectly…

If the marionette is dead, it probably doesn't possess the fate of a living being. No so-called luck. Even if there is, it's locked in darkness. That spells death…

If we can't locate Loki, who possesses Faceless powers, maybe we can start with his marionette!

With this plan in mind, Lumian concentrated, carefully observing the destiny of the people standing more than ten to twenty meters away.

He scanned everything that had a destiny and wasn't shrouded in darkness.

After a rapid survey, Lumian couldn't identify any potential marionette targets.

He let out a slow, disappointed sigh.

"Let's get out of here. The firefighters are on their way. Official Beyonders should be arriving soon," Franca warned Lumian.

Lumian withdrew his gaze and left Rue Anarchie before the crimson flames could be extinguished.

After taking a dozen steps, Lumian suddenly remembered Monsieur Ruhr, who had succumbed to illness, and Madame Michel, who had hanged herself while singing the Capital of Joy.

He feared that he might unwittingly bring a catastrophe involving Beyonder powers to Auberge du Coq Doré and his entrustee, Fitz.

As the leader of April Fool's, Loki took pleasure in manipulating others' minds. He had no qualms about harming his comrades, let alone murdering innocent people he had never met. Therefore, the likelihood was high that he would commence with Lumian's acquaintances and employ their deaths to shatter Lumian's psyche. He would secretly revel in watching Lumian descend into madness before seizing the opportunity to end his life.

Though it was only a possibility, Lumian refused to take the risk. He halted and turned towards Avenue du Marché.

"What's the matter?" Franca inquired, her expression one of confusion.

Having regained his composure, Lumian flashed a reassuring smile and replied, "Let's grab a drink at Salle de Bal Brise."

The fate of the mobsters he frequently associated with was of lesser concern. Mobsters knew they had to be prepared for such eventualities!

Franca was momentarily taken aback but quickly grasped Lumian's underlying worry.

Loki had hooked a big fish but failed to capture it. It was clear he had seen through their true appearances. He could hide in the shadows and wait for the perfect moment. As for Lumian and herself, unless they abandoned their current identities and used their anti-divination and anti-tracking abilities to survive

elsewhere, they would be left in a state of constant suspicion, fearing that any rat they saw might attack them.

Compared to Auberge du Coq Doré, the second floor of Salle de Bal Brise offered a quieter and more defensible location.

Furthermore, in the event of a Beyonder-level confrontation, it was better to involve mobsters rather than innocent bystanders.

“I’ll change my attire as well,” Franca hinted, indicating her desire to alter her appearance and remain hidden in the shadows, making it difficult for Loki to locate her and launch any potential attacks.

Similarly, she intended to have Jenna return home and stay with her brother for a while to avoid becoming collateral damage.

In the face of such a bizarre and terrifying adversary, the survivability of an Instigator remained too fragile.

Lumian gently patted the concealed Franca’s Mirror Substitution hidden beneath his clothing with his right hand, signaling the need for them to watch each other’s backs.

Franca nodded solemnly, affirming her understanding of the situation.

…

Salle de Bal Brise, the café on the second floor.

Lumian settled at the far end near the window and turned to his bodyguard, Sarkota.

“Go to Auberge du Coq Doré and fetch a bankrupt merchant named Fitz.”

With such an intermediary, Fitz would appear to have achieved his objectives through his association with the Savoie Mob, and there was no direct connection to Ciel Dubois. If Loki intended to select a victim, he would likely focus on the Savoie Mob members affiliated with Lumian.

With the weighty satchel resting on his lap, Lumian patiently awaited Fitz’s arrival while contemplating the Loki-related issues at hand.

Having lost track of the April Fool’s leader, Lumian was left with only certain phenomena to guide him in this matter.

One of the details was an option Lumian had predetermined before taking action.

Upon leaving Salle de Bal Unique, Lumian had intentionally followed the same anti-tracking procedures as before. He reverted to his original appearance, changed his clothing, and modified his satchel. However, as he traversed Rue Ancienne again and reunited with Franca, he refrained from employing any anti-

tracking measures. This was done to establish a comparative sample and identify any discrepancies.

After all, if he failed to capture the bizarre and seemingly unkillable Loki, his efforts would be in vain.

He needed to gain something valuable from this encounter.

This was a smaller trap concealed within a larger one.

Logically, if my anti-tracking procedures had shaken off Loki previously, there should be no reason for an exception this time. I had meticulously paid attention to the people and creatures around me, even avoiding the watchful eyes of birds in the sky. Even if a mere insect became one of Loki's marionettes, it would struggle to keep up with my swiftness…

Therefore, either Franca had been targeted early in the morning, or Loki recognized me when I passed through Rue Ancienne again after my anti-tracking.

Franca carried out anti-divination procedures and was a distance away from the Alone Bar and Salle de Bal Unique. She didn't even enter Rue Ancienne and had used non-mystical methods to observe. It's unlikely that she'll be exposed so quickly unless Loki was aware from the outset that such an observer would be present…

The likeliest scenario was that Loki had recognized me when I passed through Rue Ancienne again after my anti-tracking procedures. But how had this recognition occurred? I had reverted to my original appearance, altered my clothing, and even chosen to pass through in a rented carriage to avoid suspicion. According to Anthony, this should have concealed my unchanged leather shoes from prying eyes and hidden my typical gait and body language…

I had even applied cologne to mask my original scent…

What unique characteristics do I possess that allows Loki to discern my identity within such a brief period?

Lumian compared the differences and gradually arrived at a hypothesis.

Either a Marionettist or one of his marionettes possesses the ability to directly identify a person at the level of their soul, consciousness, or some other aspect, or Loki can perceive distinctive traits that set me apart from others—such as Inevitability's angel, Mr. Fool's seal, or the Blood Emperor's aura?

Although Lie belongs to the Seer pathway, it does not have a readily detectable convergence force that corresponds to Loki's Sequence…

The more Lumian pondered, the more convinced he became that Loki had a means of piercing his disguise, but his tracking abilities were limited. A vigilant target who remained wary of strangers, animals, birds, and insects while being impossible to carry out any direct divination would successfully evade him.

Regardless of how Loki told him apart, this was the best explanation when carrying out the before-and-after comparison.

With this in mind, Lumian had a new idea.

Lumian's lips curled slightly as he cast his gaze toward the dark night sky.

Fifteen minutes later, Fitz, the bankrupt merchant, was brought into the café by Sarkota

Lumian signaled for Sarkota to step aside momentarily and addressed Fitz, "I've already recovered the money. How much do you think you should receive?"

As he spoke, Lumian emptied the banknotes, gold coins, and valuable accessories onto the table, his eyes briefly scanning over them.

"About 130,000 verl d'or in total."

Fitz blurted out, "60,000, no, 50,000. No, just give me 30,000 verl d'or."

With a smile, Lumian separated a few bundles of neatly bound banknotes and tossed them to Fitz.

"As we agreed, the interest belongs to me, and I'll take 50% of the principal. Here's 50,000 verl d'or."

Fitz accepted the money with gratitude, expressing his heartfelt thanks.

While he didn't receive the full amount, 50,000 verl d'or was a substantial sum that would enable him to start anew with hope in his heart.

50% of the principal along with interest was a fair arrangement!

Lumian was equally pleased. Through the operation facilitated by the Angel of Time by Mr. Fool's side, he had effortlessly gained 50,000 verl d'or in banknotes and 30,000 gold coins.

After all, he had worked so hard to gather gold, but in the end, he only accumulated 75,000 gold.

Deep in thought, he contemplated the idea of purchasing sacrificial offerings from the corresponding domain as a token of gratitude to Mr. Fool and the Angel of Time.

After waiting for over half an hour, Lumian ascended to the bedroom on the second floor. He discarded his satchel and employed Lie to alter his appearance once more, assuming the likeness of a male Aurore with black hair and brown eyes.

He changed into a shirt, vest, trousers, and leather boots, stowed away Lie, and transferred the Flog boxing gloves into his briefcase. He carefully surveyed the scene beyond the window.

Once he confirmed that no humans, rats, or birds were in the vicinity, Lumian pushed open the window and gracefully leaped out, seemingly unaware that Loki might possess the ability to see through his disguise.

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Chapter 386 - 386 Caution

386 Caution

In the dark and deserted back alley,

Finally, he arrived at Rue des Blouses Blanches and entered the seemingly "abandoned" safe house, whose lease had not yet expired.

Following a process, he pulled the heavy curtains shut and meticulously inspected every corner of the room.

Compared to before, he not only eradicated the bedbugs and routed the rats but he also left no room for tiny, rice-grain-sized flying insects. He demanded absolute cleanliness.

With that done, Lumian seated himself at the table. He smoothed out a sheet of paper and began to write.

"Honorable Madame Hela,

"When I took part in the April Fool's team discussion masquerading as my sister, Muggle, I couldn't help but notice the peculiar reactions of Hisoka, Mad Lady, Bard, and Ultraman upon Muggle's unexpected return after her prolonged absence. I suspect 'I Know Someone' was the psychiatrist Muggle sought in her final moments.

"Simultaneously, they were collaborating with Loki in a ruse, hoping to entice members from other teams to embark on a subterranean quest for the remains of the Ancient Sun God.

"I believe Loki is the de facto leader of April Fool's. If there's anything awry with the others, it undoubtedly concerns him as well. Consequently, I acquired a copy of the Ancient Sun God's information from him and enlisted divination services to examine the mechanical typewriter responsible for producing the text. It happened at the Alone Bar on Rue Ancienne in Trier Quartier de l'Observatoire.

"Following some field investigation, it became apparent that this locale serves as the stronghold for Bureau 8. However, Loki appears to have set his sights on me. I was assaulted in the evening and narrowly escaped becoming his marionette. My escape, though, exposed my true identity to him.

"As I write this letter, I find myself in the safe house I had previously prepared. Nevertheless, I can't be certain whether I have eluded Loki's pursuit.

“I strongly suspect there’s something amiss with him. If left unchecked, he could pose a grave threat to the Research Society in the days ahead.

“I hope to receive your assistance.”

Lumian felt no shame in laying out his intentions plainly.

His plan was to make himself the bait that would draw Loki out of hiding, while Hela, with her ability to harness Concealment, would lurk in the shadows, ready to deliver the decisive blow to the leader of April Fool’s.

Perhaps only Hela, with her superior Sequence and mastery of Concealment, had a chance of evading detection and discovering the true body of their bizarre and unkillable adversary.

After folding the letter, Lumian swiftly arranged the altar and summoned the pure silver skull adorned with pale-white flames in its eye sockets.

…

Franca stealthily made her way back to Apartment 601 at 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches. She used her persuasive abilities to convince Jenna to temporarily vacate the premises for a couple of days.

Only after Jenna repeatedly confirmed that she would be of no assistance did she reluctantly give up her facade of bravery, departing amidst a string of curses.

As she applied makeup, she couldn’t help but curse fate’s mother.

Such skills were fundamental for an apprentice actress.

With a simple disguise in place, Franca seamlessly shifted between invisibility and concealment within the shadows, weaving her way through the market district.

She made a concerted effort to thwart any attempts at divination and employed anti-tracking techniques learned from Lumian.

Finally, she returned to Rue des Blouses Blanches and entered Building 6.

This was the safe house she had prepared for herself, conveniently overlooking her original residence.

Phew… Franca, having completed all the procedures, heaved a sigh of relief and lay down in the Loen-style recliner.

Simultaneously, she muttered to herself, I’ve only known Ciel for less than three months. Why does it feel like I’ve experienced more in this time than in the past year…

Is this guy some sort of jinx reincarnate?

…

In the secure confines of the safe house on Rue des Blouses Blanches, Lumian patiently waited for nearly fifteen minutes. Then, from the abrupt darkness, the pure silver skull's head emerged, clutching a simple folded letter in its skeletal teeth.

"Thank you," Lumian replied habitually, accepting the letter.

If Hela was unwilling to engage with a suspected member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, Lumian had no choice but to abandon his current plan and swiftly locate Franca. He would guide her through spirit world traversal to distant locales like the hill district, Quartier éraste, and other suburbs before returning.

He felt that it was the only way to evade Loki's pursuit or lock-on. Moving openly was out of the question unless he shifted to an entirely different area.

Lumian unfolded the paper and discovered that Hela's response was succinct: "Got it."

A wry smile curled at the corners of Lumian's mouth as he conjured crimson flames from his hand, igniting the reply.

Without delay, he restored the table's surface to its ordinary state and reverted to his original appearance, aided by the Lie earring.

Next, Lumian extinguished the carbide lamp and reclined on the bed, closing his eyes and feigning slumber.

As minutes slipped away, night settled in, and Rue des Blouses Blanches descended into stillness.

The crimson moonlight filtered through heavy curtains, casting a subdued, eerie glow within the room.

After an indeterminate span of time, a small, grayish-black figure emerged from a concealed crevice in the corner—a nondescript rat.

Soundlessly and stealthily, the rat approached the table, ascending its surface. It moved about with deliberate intent, as if surveying its territory for any signs of intrusion.

After a brief inspection, it halted its actions and retreated into the shadowy corners untouched by the dim moonlight. Its body now faced the bed.

The rat fixated its gaze upon Lumian with an unnervingly human-like intensity.

Nearly ten minutes passed, and faint, nearly imperceptible footsteps echoed from the corridor outside the apartment.

Tap, tap, tap. The footsteps drew nearer.

Abruptly, the footsteps vanished as if they had never been or had come to a standstill at some unseen juncture.

The rat retreated from the shadowy realm untouched by the crimson moonlight, traversing the table and vanishing through the same crevice it had emerged from.

With swiftness, it disappeared, leaving the room in an even deeper silence, broken only by the faint sound of Lumian's slow, rhythmic breathing.

Lumian didn't open his eyes. His body was very relaxed, as if he had truly fallen asleep.

…

6 Rue des Blouses Blanches, in an apartment.

Franca reclined in the recliner, swaying back and forth with the chair.

Troubled, she pondered what to do next. With such a bizarre and terrifying foe lurking in the shadows, the constant sense of being watched had left her restless, and she couldn't find solace whether sitting or standing.

I need to resolve this quickly. One can be a thief for a thousand days, but how can you guard against a thief for a thousand days? One misstep, and it's all over…

Why don't I abandon the mission and relocate? Or I can go all out and ask Madam Judgment for help to apprehend Loki under the pretext that the mission will likely fail. It's feasible, but I'll shoulder a debt that I won't be able to repay until I become a demigod. Even if Ciel takes half of it, it'll be a heavy burden…

We can also ask Madam Hela to convene an emergency gathering and accuse Loki and the others of causing Muggle's death on the spot. We can request that we find reliable members to interrogate each other and see which side is lying. Uh, we can't be entirely sure if there's really something wrong with Loki and the others, but it's certain that I colluded with an outsider and lured in a spy…

The more Franca thought about it, the more frustrated she became. She used proverbs from her homeland and didn't deliberately change it.

Suddenly, an overwhelming sense of danger gripped her, and simultaneously, an eerie chill crawled up her spine.

Her body stiffened, and a figure reflected in her lake-like eyes.

Clad in a short black formal suit typical of clerks, with neatly combed brown hair, a face bearing Southern Continent heritage, and dull green eyes…

Wraith! The word flashed through her mind as she recognized the nature of the impending attack.

Franca's thoughts became hazy, and her right hand instinctively rose, as if resisting an unseen force.

She channeled the spirituality within her Soul Body, preparing to unleash the black flames of a Demoness.

This ability targeted a Spirit Body and was capable of incinerating Wraiths. Demonesses possessed a heightened resistance to such flames compared to other pathways, and they could even use injuries to escape or severely harm their adversaries.

At that moment, Franca heard a magnetic voice.

"It's futile. Surrender."

The sound pierced Franca's mind like sharp arrows, interrupting her attempt to condense the black flames.

As soon as the voice faded away, her mind seemed to be shrouded in a thick fog, and a thick frosted glass appeared in front of her.

The voice continued, "I didn't use my full strength in the evening to test the waters. The person impersonating Muggle with a high-level existence sealed in him must possess some special abilities. If I hadn't done my best to gather information, I might have been the one to die.

"After the probe, things got even more interesting. I went to his place just now and felt that it wasn't safe enough. Therefore, I planned to turn you into my marionette and launch a surprise attack.

"Heh heh, do you think you can escape my grasp? There's something special about us. As long as we're within a kilometer of each other, I can use the power of a great existence to sense your location.

"I've long yearned for a Demoness to be my marionette. It'll definitely taste good…"

Franca's Spirit Body was repeatedly affected by the sound, interrupting her efforts to activate Mirror Substitution and condense black flames in advance. Her thoughts became increasingly sluggish, and her joints felt as if they were filled with glue.

Can… Loki… sense… my location?

What's… so special… Why… can he…

Before Franca could piece together any answers or formulate a complete response, the magnetic voice, now with a sinister smile, continued, “I can’t waste any more time. I must accelerate to avoid unforeseen complications.”

At this point, the voice turned respectful and recited in Franca’s unusually familiar language, “The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings;

“The Sky Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings…”

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Chapter 387 - 387 Vile

387 Vile

In the room with the thick curtains, Lumian suddenly felt the Mirror Substitution inside his clothes turn abnormally cold. Even through the linen shirt, he couldn't help but shiver.

Beneath the faint crimson moonlight, the mirror lost its luster, its surface resembling ice.

Lumian knew that Franca was in danger. Without hesitation, he activated the mystical connection between the substitute and its true form, emitting a dim light from the black mark on his right shoulder.

In an instant, Lumian vanished from the bed, reappearing in the living room at 6 Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Almost simultaneously, Lumian saw the surroundings engulfed in an eerie grayness, a fog obscuring the crimson moonlight. Franca lay in a recliner, her body contorting as if she fought for survival.

Her lake-colored eyes were filled with a turbulent mix of emotions: anger, fear, anxiety, and worry. A vague figure seemed to encircle her. Her head tried to move, but her movements were restrained by invisible threads.

Suddenly, the sound of nails scraping on a blackboard assaulted their senses, incomprehensible words piercing their Spirit Bodies. Their consciousness soared upward until they reached a dark void shimmering with countless stars.

In the highest reaches of this void, mysterious symbols swirled, their forms beyond description.

They coalesced into a dynamic, otherworldly door that defied the intrusion of even the moon's crimson light.

Lumian and Franca's spirits were drawn inexorably toward the door. As they approached, a faint voice emanated from within—a voice that seemed to hold the secrets of the entire universe, as well as the madness, self-destruction, and darkness lurking within every heart.

With each step toward the dynamic door, the maddening ramblings grew more intense, causing their heads to throb in agony. Yet an overpowering, primal urge compelled them to enter, to merge with the formless entity behind the door, and to partake in a clandestine pact that promised essential, primordial, extraordinary,

and potent knowledge.

Amidst the sea of incomprehensible symbols, the door stood slightly ajar, allowing invisible entities to pass through.

With a resounding hum, Lumian and Franca's minds were plunged into a state of blankness, as if struck by a relentless force.

The chaotic ravings they had heard coalesced into grotesque, shadowy entities that corroded their very Soul Bodies and physical bodies.

Franca's eyes widened, and her flaxen-colored hair fluttered in the windless air, vaguely thickening.

Blood seeped from the corners of her eyes, nostrils, ears, mouth, and pores, as if a demon was trying to separate her flesh from her skin.

Franca's thoughts were in a state of intense disorder, as if a human had been thrown into a factory blender.

Seizing the moment, the Wraith that had been attached to Franca detached itself from the Demoness of Pleasure.

This Wraith, dressed in a sleek black suit, its eyes flickering with a sinister green hue, let out a piercing shriek.

A cacophonous shattering sound, both illusory and real, filled the room as Franca's body vanished from the recliner and reappeared in the bedroom.

Beneath the shattered mirror's reflection on the recliner, Lumian, though still affected by the ravings and shrieks, fared better than Franca.

Despite the excruciating headache, scattered thoughts, and ruptured capillaries in various places, he retained some semblance of instinctual reaction and basic cognition. His face contorted grotesquely amidst the blood, but he held on.

In the next moment, the Wraith disappeared from the recliner and manifested within Lumian's blue eyes.

His mind instantly fogged, and his body grew frigid, as if his very blood had turned to ice.

Still capable of thought, Lumian promptly utilized his spirit world traversal ability to escape the room, teleporting several hundred meters away.

He understood that a Marionettist couldn't naturally transform into a Wraith, and the Wraith that possessed him was likely a marionette. With their distinctive combat styles, it was improbable for a Marionettist to engage directly. Therefore, once the marionette was beyond the Marionettist's range, it would lose control and become useless.

When the time came, Lumian would “teleport” back and attempt to take Franca away.

While this would leave him essentially incapacitated, it would also disable Loki’s marionette. The adversary would then need to decide whether to launch a direct assault or retreat cautiously, as he couldn’t predict how many teleportations Lumian’s spirituality could endure—a capability unusual for a Pyromaniac. Loki’s assessment might not be entirely accurate in this regard!

Just as Lumian was on the verge of activating his spirit world traversal mark, he heard a magnetic voice: “Give up.”

The words pierced Lumian’s Spirit Body, disrupting his intentions.

Subsequently, his thoughts grew sluggish, and his body stiffened.

The magnetic voice chuckled softly.

“I don’t know what kind of trap you’ve set in your room, but it likely involves Hela, doesn’t it? After all, without her cooperation, you couldn’t have masqueraded as Muggle and infiltrated the Research Society, could you? Lumian Lee, Aurore Lee’s brother, I’ve seen your wanted poster.”

“In Trier, the easiest Beyonder to come into contact with is from the Hunter pathway. That’s why there’s a saying:

“‘Never fight a Hunter on his turf.’

“No one knows what sort of strange traps Hunters have laid in their ‘turf.’

“I didn’t want to take that risk, nor did I plan to face Hela directly. Although I’m not overly concerned about her unless she’s found a way to become a demigod, why would I engage her on a Hunter’s ‘turf’? My choice was to stage a surprise attack on Hidden Blade, drawing you out and away from your turf to fight on a ground of my choosing.

“After this afternoon’s reconnaissance, I confirmed that both of you possess an item capable of monitoring each other’s condition or a mysticism connection—likely the exchange of Mirror Substitution. Heh heh, ever wonder what my other marionette was doing during that time?

“In truth, I have no intention of killing Hidden Blade or turning her into a marionette. A living Demoness serves my purposes better. I can use this encounter to make her suffer and despair. When she advances to Sequence 4 using that, I’ll have a demigod marionette…”

The voice carried no provocation, yet each word ignited a burning rage within Lumian.

These words continued to disrupt Lumian's mind and Spirit Body, interfering with his abilities. With the dual constraints of Wraith possession and Marionettist, Lumian resembled a statue, unable to speak or move. He stood frozen, awaiting the inexorable verdict of fate.

A thin gray fog enveloped the room, sealing off all sound from the outside world.

The magnetic voice chuckled again, its taunting words continuing.

"It really shouldn't have been so complicated, but you see, you have a high-ranking individual sealed within you. To ensure my own safety, the only option is to turn you into a marionette. I have no desire to face a high-ranking being after your demise. Who knows if he'll thank me or finish me along the way?

"Indeed, when you showed up at the gathering and joined our April Fool's team, I sensed that something was amiss. I suspected that Muggle had used a seal to escape the fragmentation of her soul. Little did I know, she was truly deceased. You are her brother…

"Haha, I still remember, in the latter part of last year, every time she attended a gathering, she sought out I Know Someone to treat her psychological issues and the hidden dangers arising from the improper use of the Soul Summoning Spell. And I Know Someone would divulge her pain, struggles, vulnerabilities, and transformations to all of us each time.

"It's quite vile, completely against a doctor's principles, but it's fun and interesting. It gave us a sense of accomplishment and made us all laugh."

Upon hearing this, Lumian's mind buzzed.

He had been mildly annoyed by Loki's earlier critiques, but now, as Loki recounted Aurore's experiences, his anger reached a boiling point.

Aurore had been genuinely unwell, seeking treatment from a doctor. However, not only did this doctor patronize her, but he also derived amusement from her suffering. He repeatedly violated her privacy, sharing her struggles and illnesses with others, leading them to mock her behind her back.

What made it all the more despicable was that this group of individuals had sold Aurore the Soul Summoning Spell.

Dammit!

Every single one… of them… deserves death!

They deserve… the most tragic way… of death!

Though Lumian's mind remained ensnared in stasis, his anger finally erupted. It surged through his spirit and coursed into his flesh.

He couldn’t control it, not under the constant interference.

Crimson flames erupted from Lumian’s body, and small red tendrils protruded from his eyes, radiating a malevolent blood-red hue.

It was a precursor to losing control. If this continued, he would truly lose control.

But Lumian felt no fear. Instead, he cooperated.

Even if I… lose control and turn into a monster… or a lunatic… I will… drag you… all of you… into the abyss!

Relying on his body’s “instinctive reaction,” crimson flames spread in all directions, incinerating the Wraith, igniting furniture, and causing a fire.

Unfortunately, this fiery onslaught proved ineffective against the Wraith-form marionette and Loki, who remained concealed somewhere beyond reach of the flames.

Its sole purpose, for those brief two seconds, was to disrupt the magnetic voice.

“It’s useless. I know you mainly aim to use the flames to signal for help from the outside world rather than attacking me directly. But I’ve previously deceived Hidden Blade. Despite my claims of accelerating the progress, I actually harnessed the power of the gray fog to create a unique environment that isolates information here.

“While you can indeed break through the residual fog barrier if you go all out since I can’t ask for too much power, I can’t allow that.”

As Loki finished speaking, a frenzied, terrifying, violent, and exaggerated aura exploded from Lumian’s body. It shredded the thin fog and shot skyward.

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Chapter 388 - 388 An Unquiet Night

388 An Unquiet Night

As the frenzied and violent aura surged out of the thin gray fog, 6 Rue des Blouses Blanches trembled slightly, as if in shock.

On a bed in a quiet room diagonally below Franca's apartment, a man whose eyes had been tightly shut, seemingly asleep, suddenly snapped awake. He gazed up warily and fearfully at the source of the terrifying aura.

At the same time, beneath église Saint-Robert, within the market district's Inquisition's office,

Angoulême de Fran?ois, who was on night duty, leaped to his feet and prepared to rush to the area where mystical items were sealed. He hoped to enhance his ability to handle accidents and disasters in a short period.

In other rooms, Imre, Valentine, and the others also sensed the violent aura that seemed to shake all of Trier. Some trembled, while others turned pale.

This was even more terrifying than the Tree of Shadow disaster.

However, they didn't stand still. Some dashed out of the room to rendezvous with Angoulême, while others raised their arms and hastily prayed to the Sun before sprinting toward the église Saint-Robert above.

Quartier de la Cathédrale Commémorative, 11 Rue des Fontaines.

Gardner Martin, who had been stroking his full-body armor, furrowed his brow and cast a puzzled glance toward the southeastern region.

He felt something calling to him, causing his blood to boil.

Deep underground in Trier, Olson, the starved bear-like man who had been lugging a small brown suitcase, suddenly perked up his ears to listen for any nearby movements.

The distant sounds of killings and shouts faintly reached him.

The Supervisor of the Iron and Blood Cross Order's eyes flashed with ferocity and madness. He extended his right hand and pressed it against his neck.

An indiscernible thread emerged, emitting fiery blood.

In the island district at the center of the Srenzo River, the Eternal Blazing Sun Church's Saint Viève cathedral was already shrouded in darkness. Only the nearby bell tower remained lit, but at that moment, the slumbering cathedral suddenly bathed in brilliant sunlight.

Sunlight flooded the onion-like domes, illuminating every stained glass window.

To the north of Trier, in the heart of the cathedral district, towering iron-black chimneys loomed above the God of Steam and Machinery's patriarchal cathedral.

Rumbling sounds echoed as the massive steam engine installed within the cathedral roared to life. Vast amounts of pale-white fog billowed forth from the forest-like chimneys, enshrouding the night sky.

In Quartier éraste, a small town very close to the Sacred Heart Cloister, a golden retriever and the lady beside it turned and gazed into the distance of Trier's metropolis.

Within Red Swan Castle, Count Poufer, already lying on his bed, opened his eyes.

He sensed the entire ancient castle become extremely oppressive, and nightmarish roars and screams echoed from deep underground.

Hidden in a room diagonally below Franca's apartment, Loki had just reacted to the violent and terrifying aura. Before he could summon back the Wraith that had possessed Lumian and use it to escape through the spirit world with him out of caution, the surrounding darkness instantly intensified, swallowing the crimson moonlight and bringing an extreme calmness to the area.

Lumian's thoughts returned to normal. He channeled his anger, pouring all his pent-up emotions into the crimson flames.

"Go to hell!"

With a low growl, he took a left step forward, his eyes protruding with red vessels while twisting his waist and swinging his right fist with all his might.

With a muffled explosion, the flames on Lumian's body coalesced on the surface of his fist, naturally condensing into a blazing white fireball.

The blazing white fireball shot from Lumian's right fist, following a predetermined path, and crashed into the wall beside the apartment.

The voice he had just heard emanated from behind the wall!

Boom!

A large hole tore through the wall, revealing a man standing in the corridor.

He had brown hair, brown eyes, and a gaunt face. He was the marionette Loki had employed that evening.

He was the one who had been speaking!

Before Lumian could realize that he hadn't found the real Loki, darkness surged over him like a tidal wave, engulfing him.

Having already vented his anger and flames, Lumian's heart quickly calmed. He subconsciously closed his eyes and slowly sank to the ground.

His contorted face began to relax, and his body and soul found peace.

He no longer showed any signs of losing control.

Dressed in a black widow-like dress and a veiled bonnet, Hela emerged from the darkness.

Being the closest to the apartment while searching for traces of the battle between Loki and Lumian, she was undoubtedly the first to arrive.

Without hesitation, she made Lumian, Franca, Loki, and the two marionettes vanish.

Her figure faded, and the dense darkness rapidly dissipated.

Apart from the collapsed wall, no evidence remained at the scene.

Two seconds later, the apartment was suddenly bathed in sunlight.

…

In an uninhabited mine beneath Trier.

They were all in a deep slumber, except for Hela. Her pale face remained conscious as she stood to the side.

The vice president of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society no longer had the dry, withered hair she'd had before. It had transformed into smooth strands, now bearing the color of the night.

She pulled out a flask filled with liquor and downed a third of its contents before fixing her gaze on Lumian.

Hela's forehead began to crack silently, emitting an eerie, ancient glow that manifested into an indescribable, ancient bronze door.

The door swayed and creaked, revealing a narrow gap. Beyond it lay endless darkness, filled with countless dense, indescribable eyes seemingly lurking within.

Under the influence of this deathly aura, the Wraith attached to Lumian flew out without resistance.

In an instant, it landed on the ground, and Hela raised her right hand, pressing it against its forehead. The ancient bronze door vanished, and the dim light receded into the crack.

Hela shifted her attention to the still-slumbering Loki.

The leader of the April Fool's had an ordinary face, blending into the crowd like any other resident of Rue des Blouses Blanches.

Hela stared at him for a brief moment before her eyes lost focus.

In Loki's dream.

Hela appeared, clad in a black widow-like attire, in front of an ancient castle shrouded in a thin gray fog.

The castle's massive doors stood wide open, eerily silent like the entrance to a cemetery.

Hela glanced up at the pitch-black castle with its numerous spires and thin form before stepping through the door. She passed through the dimly lit atrium, and proceeded into the hall, where peculiar chandeliers with unknown light sources hung.

Numerous guests filled the hall, their expressions frozen like wax statues, unmoving.

Surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of wax statues was a gray platform with three stone steps. In the middle of the platform was an ancient dark-red chair.

A man in his late twenties occupied the seat.

He wore a silk top hat and a black tailcoat, with dark-gray eyes and short, brown hair. Under his high nose bridge, the subtle curl of his mouth hid a non-obvious smile.

Pressing down on the armrests on both sides, the man relaxed and leaned back in his chair.

"Who are you?" His voice echoed through the ancient castle, as if questioning Hela.

Hela walked past the crowd suspected to be wax statues and arrived in front of the man.

Her cold voice remained impassive as she inquired, "Loki, don't you recognize me?"

Loki's grin intensified.

"Hela, you've come after all…"

Seizing the opportunity presented by his dream state, Hela confronted him directly.

"Why did you harm a member of the Research Society?"

Loki's gaze shifted upwards, and he let out a laugh.

"The only purpose those fools serve is to amuse us.

"You must know that the apocalypse is imminent, just a few years away. They're all destined to die, sooner or later. It's better for them to sacrifice themselves now to provide us with entertainment."

Hela fell silent, and a chilling silence enveloped the dream, the air growing colder. Decaying, pale-white hands extended from the stone floor and surrounding walls.

After a few moments, Hela spoke again.

"Why did you harm Muggle?"

Loki's laughter ceased abruptly, replaced by a smirk as he looked at Hela.

"Because…"

His expression shifted suddenly, and Hela sensed imminent danger within the dream.

"Because the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings…"

Loki's voice faded rapidly, and the entire dream began to crumble under Hela's will. The ancient castle disintegrated into fragments, vanishing into an eerie, yet pure darkness.

Back in the real world, deep within the uninhabited mine beneath Trier, Hela opened her eyes. Countless tiny creatures wriggled beneath her pale-white skin.

In an instant, her form shifted and reassembled, no longer exhibiting the eerie abnormalities she had displayed earlier.

Loki's body had disintegrated into a pool of flesh and blood, with grotesque maggots crawling in and out of it. Hela observed silently, but no Beyonder characteristics emerged from the remains.

…

Within the pitch-black castle enveloped in a thin fog, a dark-red coffin lay in a sinister chamber.

Suddenly, a pale-white hand emerged from the coffin, gripping its wooden edge.

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Chapter 389 - 389 Suspected God

389 Suspected God

In the uninhabited quarry cave beneath Trier.

Hela observed as the transparent and distorted maggots perished, yet she didn't detect any Beyonder characteristics emerging.

She turned her attention to Lumian and Franca, who were sound asleep. Satisfied that they had regained control thanks to the night and their dreams, and their breathing had steadied, she ended her forced slumber.

Two seconds later, Lumian's eyes shot open, and he leaped up with the agility of a leopard.

In an instant, he summoned three crimson flames that illuminated the cavern.

As he kept a vigilant watch over his surroundings, Franca, still recovering from severe mental injuries, rubbed her head and slowly got to her feet, fear in her eyes.

Then, she spotted Hela in her distinctive black widow-like dress and the familiar bonnet with a veil. She blurted out, "Madame Hela, what brings you here?"

Instant regret washed over her. She had inadvertently revealed her affiliation with the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

If she hadn't spoken, she could have pretended to be nothing more than a friend of Ciel—that she wasn't Hidden Blade.

"Hidden Blade?" Hela inquired.

Franca let out a dry laugh.

"Yes, how did you recognize me?"

"You're the only Demoness in the Research Society," Hela replied calmly.

Franca felt even more embarrassed and replied ridiculously, "I recognized you based on your attire and demeanor. You never showed your face at the gatherings."

As the two acknowledged each other, Lumian's wariness visibly eased. With Madame Hela's presence, he felt his safety was assured.

Then, he noticed the two marionettes lying lifeless on the ground, surrounded by a pool of flesh infested with translucent maggots.

“Is that Loki?” Lumian pointed at the grotesque, horrifying mass.

Hela cast her gaze over.

“Yes.”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before asking, “Is he dead?”

Hela nodded slightly and said, “He succumbed to his own loss of control, but it’s not a complete demise.”

“Huh?” Franca asked in confusion.

Look at how badly minced he is. Maggots are crawling out, but he’s not completely dead?

She had already figured out why Madame Hela had appeared. Ciel, that scoundrel, must have used her as bait again and written a letter to Madame Hela to clean up the mess!

Hela looked at Lumian and said coldly, “High-level Demonesses aren’t the only ones capable of resurrection; high-level Seers can do it too. Loki likely worships an evil god in this domain. Combined with his uniqueness, he can abandon his body upon death and revive in a pre-prepared location with his characteristics intact.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t foresee this. If I had prayed for true Concealment in advance, he wouldn’t have been able to revive, and he’d leave behind his Beyonder traits.”

The woman calmly recounted her oversights, offering no excuses and showing no frustration.

Lumian’s eyes remained fixed on the grotesque mass of flesh infested with dead maggots, a slow smile spreading across his face.

The corners of his mouth curled upward as he remarked, “Not bad at all. If he were to meet his end like this, I’d be disappointed. How can I not be the one to kill him with my own hands?”

As Lumian spoke, a burning desire for High-Sequence Beyonder powers ignited within him.

Loki was undeniably formidable. Even when he and Franca had joined forces, Loki had come dangerously close to turning Lumian into a marionette. Yet, Hela, suspected to have advanced to Sequence 4, had effortlessly dispatched him in less than ten seconds.

Lumian understood that unleashing the Blood Emperor aura would undoubtedly draw the attention of official Beyonders from the market district, possibly prompting them to seek assistance from the Churches' saints. Therefore, after Hela had sought him out, she had to subdue Loki and relocate him within ten seconds. Otherwise, the chance of being intercepted by Trier's saints and angels was exceedingly high.

This was what a demigod was like!

Lumian eagerly looked forward to summarizing more Pyromaniac acting principles and digesting the potion over the next two to three months. His goal was to attempt an advancement to Conspirer. He recollected his plans for revenge against Loki and the others, the eradication of heretics, and his insatiable thirst for mystical, high-end powers.

Seeing Lumian's lack of regret or disappointment, replaced instead by an unwavering fighting spirit, Hela subtly nodded in approval.

Lumian's gaze remained fixed on Loki's corpse.

"Which evil god does he worship?"

Franca's heart skipped a beat at this question. She turned to Hela and asked, "Could it be…"

The Demoness of Pleasure paused briefly before switching to a complicated language that Lumian couldn't understand.

"The Immortal Lord…"

Hela abruptly cut her off.

"Have you forgotten that I don't understand that language either?"

"Uh…" Franca couldn't help but slap her forehead.

My pig brain!

Hela continued, "Speak in ancient Feysac or Intisian. Also, remember, pause after each line and tell me something else."

Franca quickly acknowledged her instructions, organized her thoughts, and began speaking in ancient Feysac.

"The Immortal Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings…"

Hela interrupted her once again and engaged in a brief discussion about Loki's assault.

Franca continued, "The Sky Lord of Heaven and Earth for Blessings…"

Lumian, paying close attention, began to grasp the purpose of Madame Hela's request.

It was a precaution to prevent Franca from reciting the evil god's full honorific name and potentially attracting unwanted attention.

"The Exalted Thearch of Heaven and Earth for Blessings…" Franca repeated the third line and massaged her temples. "When I heard Loki recite it, it felt like I had been transported to another world. Everything was shrouded in fog, and I couldn't discern anything clearly. My thoughts slowed to a crawl. I vaguely recall that there should be another phrase."

Hela chimed in with her own addition in ancient Feysac, "The Celestial Worthy. Of Heaven and Earth. For Blessings."

This time, she even paused the simple line twice.

Lumian couldn't help but express his confusion. "This name has a rather odd style."

It differed significantly from the honorific names of deities like Mr. Fool, the Eternal Blazing Sun, and others he was familiar with. The format and words gave off the impression of belonging to a distinct civilization.

Franca furrowed her brow in thought.

"Now that you mention it, I recall something."

Lumian inquired, "What is it?"

Franca was about to speak but then abruptly closed her mouth.

She looked at Hela with a sheepish smile.

"Do you mind if I assisted Ciel in infiltrating the Research Society to investigate the April Fool's team?"

"He had my approval," Hela replied calmly.

Franca maintained her "submissive" smile.

"Then, would you mind if I had shared the secret of our transmigration with Ciel?"

Hela fell silent for a few moments before responding, "Does it matter if I mind now? Should I Conceal both of you?"

Franca suddenly realized that this situation might not be entirely negative and hastily explained, "You see, the April Fool's team is under suspicion for Muggle's death, and there's no way around revealing our secret when investigating them. That's why I told Ciel about it. Besides, Ciel has genuinely helped us find clues

related to transmigration and the possibility of returning to our world!"

She wore an expression as if she had already made up for her mistake.

"What clues?" Hela blurted out for the first time.

Franca exhaled and said, "This is somewhat complex. Let me start by recalling what those honorific names reminded me of.

"We've been communicating, trying to find commonalities and similarities in what each of us did before transmigration to uncover the reason. Some received mysterious phones, others entered abandoned ancient temples in the mountains, and some were studying folklore culture. But I can't pinpoint what I did that led to it. It's not that I can't remember, but I've done so much.

"As you all know, I enjoy novelty. I buy new phones, play new games, try out new restaurants, and even create clothing and cosplay at major conventions. I engaged in a multitude of activities before transmigrating, making it difficult to determine which one triggered the transmigration.

"However, when I heard the honorific name Loki recited, I recalled that on that particular night, I had played a new video game called 'Terror Attack.' In the game, there was a hidden monster that had faith in something called the 'Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth.'"

Though Lumian didn't comprehend the concept of a "video game," he grasped the essence of Franca's explanation.

Her transmigration in this world appeared to be connected to the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, whom Loki worshiped!

Hela, her light-blond hair flowing naturally over her shoulders, listened attentively and contemplated for a moment before speaking, "I don't have similar recollections. As I mentioned earlier, before transmigrating, I delved into non-mainstream mythological books. There was a deity skilled in deception and pranks who bore a striking resemblance to Loki…"

Franca's eyes gleamed with insight as she ventured a hypothesis.

"Could Loki have transmigrated by reciting the four lines of the honorific name? So, upon his arrival in this world, he recollected his actions from that time and attempted to recreate them, forging a connection with that evil god?

"Yes, he spoke vaguely when discussing such matters. The members of the April Fool's team shared a similar experience…

"Could it be that we were all brought here by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings? Or did He summon us to this world?

"He's highly suspicious!"

Hela contemplated this for a moment and nodded slightly.

“At our next gathering, we can revisit this topic and communicate with others with a clearer focus.”

Franca was taken aback.

“Will the members of the April Fool’s team still attend?”

“The problematic ones probably won’t,” Hela replied calmly. “Even if we hastily arrange a gathering now, we’d have to notify them individually. This period of time is sufficient for Loki to revive and alert his associates.”

Lumian raised his eyebrows.

“Why does everyone need to be notified individually? Just invite the April Fool’s team to an emergency meeting. They won’t know if others will attend. It won’t take long to inform a dozen of them.”

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Chapter 390 - 390 Hidden Danger

390 Hidden Danger

Hela glanced at Lumian and fell silent for two seconds before saying, “Alright, I’ll get ready now.

Ten minutes, combined with the discussion they just had, was enough time for Loki to revive and alert his accomplices.

Lumian’s expression remained unchanged as he nodded gently. “We have to give it a try.”

“That’s right. Capture as many as we can. With an incisive point, it’ll be much easier to find the others,” Franca agreed with Lumian.

She suspected that Loki and his crew were responsible for the deaths of some members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

Without wasting any more time, the surroundings around Hela suddenly darkened, resisting the light of the three flames.

Her figure vanished without a trace.

This marked the beginning of preparations for the emergency gathering.

Lumian’s eyes flickered as he gazed at the decaying flesh teeming with dead maggots, lost in his own thoughts.

Franca carefully examined her body and realized that there were no substantial or obvious injuries. The pain she had previously endured was a result of the impact on her mind. As her Spirit Body was soothed and treated, only faint cracks remained.

Franca let out a long sigh of relief and said, “Loki is truly cunning and powerful. Fortunately, you thought to seek Madam Hela’s help. Otherwise, we might have become his marionettes by now.”

Lumian wholeheartedly agreed.

If he hadn’t considered borrowing Hela’s power and guessed that Loki could detect a certain trait in him, leading to the decision to bait him out tonight, perhaps the outcome wouldn’t have been in their favor.

When they were unprepared, Loki had approached them and attacked with full force. Neither he nor Franca could retaliate.

He could still use the Blood Emperor's aura, which was relatively easy to activate and didn't require complicated procedures, to attract all official Beyonders. Then, he could exploit the time difference to escape using "teleportation." However, it would condemn Franca to be controlled.

Of course, without the baiting operation, Lumian might have chosen to leave with Franca by traversing the spirit world and slipping out of Loki's sight before returning stealthily.

"You don't have to worry about becoming a marionette. Loki wants to groom you into a Sequence 4 Demoness," Lumian casually reassured Franca.

Franca was taken aback.

"He told me he's been yearning for a Demoness marionette for a long time…"

Lumian calmly pointed out that Franca had been deceived. "He lied to you. He even said that the four-line honorific name meant to accelerate the progress was, in fact, a trap for me that could isolate most of the struggling commotions."

Franca muttered to herself, "The honorific name he recited must be real. Him being able to use the traits we share and the power of that Celestial Worthy to directly locate me should be real too. As for the exact range, given the style he displayed, there's a high chance that it's nonsense. It can't be believed.

Franca suddenly turned to look at Lumian.

"Loki should have recognized that you were fake during the gathering! You don't have the aura or mark of the Celestial Worthy on you!"

"Yes." Lumian's mood sank.

"I'll have to share this detail with Madam Hela later and see if anyone can come up with a way to eliminate the Celestial Worthy aura on them. Otherwise, they'll be hunted down by Loki and the others in the future," Franca said as she looked at the Wraith that had a dark-green light seeping out and merging with a certain part of the corpse. "What should we do with this Beyonder characteristic?"

This was a Sequence 5 Beyonder characteristic!

She had her own thoughts about this spoil of war, but she didn't know Lumian's attitude.

"Madam Hela killed Loki herself, so the spoils of war must belong to her," Lumian said nonchalantly.

He then pointed at the corpse of the other marionette.

“Why hasn’t he manifested any Beyonder characteristics?”

“That’s right. He can’t be resurrected too, can he?” Franca muttered. “Could it be that he’s a bestowed who doesn’t have Beyonder characteristics?”

Her plan was to give Madame Hela the Wraith Beyonder characteristic.

Lumian nodded slowly.

“In the evening, I thought he was a marionette of the Sun pathway. Later, when I was under his control, every word he spoke sounded like crazy ravings. It could affect my mind and Spirit Body, which was different from the Sun pathway’s style. Yes, he should be a bestowed of an evil god, made into a marionette by Loki.”

“I’ll ask Madam Hela later.” Just as Franca finished speaking, Hela’s figure in a black widow-like dress outlined itself in the empty mine.

She said to Lumian and Franca, “In five minutes, we’ll recite the incantation and enter the Nation of the Evernight’s palace.”

“Alright.” Lumian took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

Franca immediately informed Hela about the possible common trait among the members of the Research Society. Finally, she asked, “Is there a way to confirm and eliminate it? A Marionettist like Loki lurks in the shadows and can find us at any moment. It’s truly terrifying.”

Hela pondered for a moment and replied, “Firstly, advance to Sequence 4 and become a demigod. Only then can you barely suppress the aura left behind by Celestial Worthy. Secondly, search for mystical items with hidden and secret-keeping effects.

“I can only think of these two solutions at the moment. I’ll see if anyone else has a better idea at the next gathering.”

At that moment, Lumian looked at Hela and asked anxiously, “Madame, did you find out anything from Loki?”

Hela took out a flask and downed another third.

Her pale-white face flushed as she said coldly, “When I asked Loki why he wanted to harm the other members, he said it was for fun and to create pranks to satisfy his emotions and mind. However, when I asked him why he wanted to harm Muggle, his answer was Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings…”

Selling the Soul Summoning Spell to Aurore and guiding her to use it on herself seemed to be the will of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings.

“Why does He want this done… Aurore is only a Sequence 7. She’s just a nobody…” Lumian lowered his head and muttered in pain.

Hela replied coldly, “Probably because the original body of Muggle and her family are problematic.”

Lumian fell silent for a moment before saying, “Could Loki be lying? A person full of lies like him might not be telling the truth.”

“In the dreamscape I created, he can’t lie unless he gains the ability to maintain lucidity in advance, but that’s impossible.” Hela denied Lumian’s guess.

Dreamscape… Franca glanced at Hela and felt that this didn’t match her impression of her Sequence pathway.

Lumian fell silent once again.

Aurore’s transmigration was suspected to have been brought about by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings. After her resurrection, she had been targeted by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings because Roche Louise Sanson and her family were believers in Inevitability. This made Aurore’s subsequent encounter seem like a predetermined tragedy.

Seeing this, Franca changed the subject and pointed at the two marionettes’ corpses.

“Madame Hela, that Beyonder characteristic is the spoil of war you deserve. What we want to know is why this marionette didn’t produce any Beyonder characteristics?”

Hela didn’t refuse. As she watched the Wraith Beyonder characteristic emerge, she inquired about Franca and Lumian’s feelings when they were controlled.

After a brief exchange, she pondered and said, “This should be a bestowed who believes in an evil god. The corresponding Sequence 7 is an Orator, and Sequence 6 is a Singer. These two Sequences can transmit different mystical powers with their voices, matching your descriptions.

“In addition, Beyonders of this pathway often perform secret deed rituals at Sequence 9 and obtain mysteries and knowledge through a formless door. Different people hear and experience different things, and the subsequent abilities they obtain will be different. Being able to use singing to create a sun’s blinding effect should be one of these manifestations.”

“Which evil god?” Franca blurted out.

Hela shook her head.

“I don’t know the exact honorific name either. It’s dangerous for us to know anyway.

“I’ve encountered His believers. They sometimes refer to this evil god as the First Philosophy or Arcane Controller.”

Without waiting for Franca to ask further, Hela nodded slightly and said, “We should head to the gathering.”

Lumian and Franca recited the incantation simultaneously.

“A Beyonder from ancient times, Ruler of the Nation of the Evernight, noble Mother of the Sky, I beseech your permission to enter your kingdom.”

As the surrounding darkness and slumber dissipated, Lumian and Franca arrived at the ancient and dilapidated palace again.

There was no one here yet. It was empty and silent.

Franca felt that something was amiss. After thinking for more than ten seconds, she realized something.

“We haven’t disguised ourselves!”

Just as she finished speaking, she saw Lumian shrouded in a hazy dream-like fog, obscuring his exact form and appearance.

Lumian then used the Niese Face to transform himself into a hooded Muggle clad in a Warlock’s black robe.

With Madame Hela’s help, Franca breathed a sigh of relief and waited patiently for the April Fool’s team to arrive.

As time ticked by, two figures suddenly outlined inside the silent palace.

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Chapter 391 - 391 Idiots

391 Idiots

The figures entering the ancient palace were Black Earth and Bax. Black Earth sported a furry hat and a thick leather mask, while Bax, on the other hand, had opted for just shorts and a brass mask.

Upon spotting Hela, they acknowledged her with a slight nod as a greeting.

Their eyes then roved over Franca, who hadn't tagged her code name, and Muggle, enveloped in a dreamy mist.

"Who's this?" Black Earth, clad like a Hunter from the mountains, pointed at Franca, a note of confusion in his voice.

"Hidden Blade. I rushed and forgot to tag myself," Franca replied.

Black Earth and Bax promptly dropped their suspicions and relaxed.

In a situation like this emergency gathering, it was perfectly normal for Hidden Blade to slip up.

This was her style!

Soon after, other members of the April Fool's team arrived one by one, but Lumian didn't see the five most suspicious targets— I Know Someone, Hisoka, Bard, Mad Lady, and Ultraman.

His expression darkened gradually, sensing that Loki had been resurrected and the problematic members had been alerted.

The dozen or so individuals gathered here were potential pawns. If Loki and his gang went too far and were discovered by other members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, they could be used as scapegoats for the investigation.

There was nothing to find fault with them, thus ensuring the six true believers in the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings remained concealed.

At that moment, Black Earth and the rest started to realize that something was amiss.

Why were there so few attendees at the emergency gathering?

The agreed time had already passed, and typically, at least half of the society should have shown up by now.

“Hela, what’s going on?” Bax, wearing nothing but a mask and shorts, asked in a deep voice.

Lumian sneered, looking at them as if they were a bunch of fools.

If Loki and his crew were evil, then these people were simply fools. They believed they were clever and had uncovered the truth, thinking they were indulging in pre-apocalypse pleasures. In reality, they were just being used as pawns and shields.

Lumian was willing to bet that Loki, I Know Someone, and the other core members of the April Fool’s team would mock these fools during their private gatherings.

Hela’s tone remained as cold as ice as she began, “I summoned you to this gathering because Loki betrayed us.”

Black Earth, Bax, and the others were taken aback. They glanced around, but Loki was nowhere to be seen.

Hela continued, “He believes in an evil god and led I Know Someone and the others to harm numerous Research Society members.”

“Such accusations require evidence,” Bax instinctively retorted.

With the Lie earring on, Lumian spoke in Aurore’s voice, “I’m the evidence!

“You must have seen me buy the Soul Summoning Spell. This caused a mental problem and nearly caused me to lose control. Fortunately, I found someone to help me in time and sealed my split personality.

“Before this, I’ve been seeking treatment from I Know Someone, but instead of improving, my condition only worsened.

“I approached them to reason with them, but they ended up planning to murder me!”

Black Earth fell silent for a moment before saying, “I remember that you bought it from Mad Lady. They lied to you because transmigration should be a matter between two parties, not a one-sided reason. Otherwise, why did you transmigrate to this world and happen to possess such people? The original bodies must have done something to establish the connection between the two worlds. Therefore, before figuring out what caused you to transmigrate, finding the remnant soul of the original body and asking might gain something unexpected.

“Muggle, weren’t you homesick back then? How could you believe such a reason?”

As they heard this, some of the April Fool's team members present couldn't help but show teasing and mocking expressions in their eyes.

Muggle had fallen for a trick that could only fool children!

None of them had been fooled by Mad Lady. Even if she claimed to have tried and achieved certain results, it couldn't be considered a clue.

Mad Lady… Lumian repeated the code name inwardly.

A chuckle escaped him as he continued, "I was indeed blinded by the desire to return home, but you weren't any better.

"Take a look. Are Loki, Mad Lady, and Bard here?

"They know what they're doing, and they understand that if they're exposed, they have to leave the Research Society immediately. But you, fools, and idiots, don't know anything and are still cooperating with them!

"Even pigs and dogs are smarter than you!"

The absence of Loki and the others was like Muggle's mocking arrow, piercing the hearts and minds of Black Earth and the other April Fool's team members.

Some of them erupted in anger, feeling humiliated and wanting to retort. Others swayed in despair and confusion, while some felt as if countless insects were gnawing at their hearts. The pain was palpable.

Witnessing this, Franca entered Instigation mode and delivered a decisive blow.

"Don't you understand? You're discarded pawns, abandoned targets, mere agents who have lost their usefulness!

"You've never been core members of April Fool's. You've never earned Loki's trust. They only mock you behind your backs!

"Now that Loki and the others have been exposed, they can hunt down the Research Society members without fear. Who do you think will be the easiest for them to locate and target?

"The only thing you can do is recall the details of your dealings with Loki and the others, including the real-life pranks you executed, so that we can eliminate these traitors as soon as possible.

"Remember, leniency comes with honesty, resistance comes with severity."

Black Earth, Bax, and the others followed Hidden Blade's logic and realized the grim possibility.

They exchanged glances, their hearts clearly wavering. The few who had witnessed Loki and the others' capabilities couldn't help but tremble slightly.

Finally, Franca dropped a bombshell.

"Don't think you can escape the hunt just because you can relocate. Let me tell you, Muggle's experience indicates that Loki and the others seem to have a way to track Research Society members within a certain range through some mystical connection.

"I'll share the specific method with everyone at the next official gathering."

Black Earth gritted his teeth and said, "There are too many details. I don't think I can recall them all in just a few hours."

The other April Fool's team members nodded in agreement.

Hela thought for a moment and replied, "Go back, write down all the details, and send them to me.

"Remember, pack your belongings and stay at a motel or hotel at least five kilometers away."

Bax and the others let out sighs of relief and agreed.

Shortly after, Lumian noticed their eyes closing, as if they had fallen asleep while standing.

He and Franca exchanged thoughtful glances and then realized that Madame Hela's eyes had lost focus before closing as well.

After a moment, Hela opened her eyes and said to Lumian and Franca, "There are no hidden Loki helpers or believers in the Celestial Worthy."

This is a precaution in case Loki had risked leaving an accomplice to gather intelligence… Franca came to a realization.

In the next instant, Black Earth, Bax, and the others awakened simultaneously, reciting the incantation discreetly as they left the ancient and decaying palace.

Lumian dispelled the Niese Face, took off the Lie earring, and turned to Hela.

"Every time we use the incantation at a gathering, we should be tainted by the Sealed Artifacts' Concealment aura, right?

"Can we use this to track down Mad Lady and the others?"

Hela shook her head.

"They no longer have the corresponding auras."

Clearly, she had tried it before.

Lumian remained silent, exhaling slowly and silently.

The trio left the Nation of the Evernight and returned to the uninhabited mine beneath Trier.

Hela put away the Wraith Beyonder characteristic and spoke to Lumian and Franca.

“If we can’t uncover Loki and truly eliminate him, you can stay in Trier’s market district for another three months at most. When that time comes, regardless of any unfinished business, you’ll have to consider relocating.”

“Why three months?” Franca inquired, her confusion apparent.

Staying even another week seemed perilous.

Hela provided a simple explanation.

“While Loki has been resurrected with his Beyonder characteristics, he has lost all his marionettes. A Marionettist won’t rashly appear and attack others without a marionette, unless they are excessively confident and perceive you as weak. And you’ve already demonstrated significant strength.

“For a Marionettist without a marionette, acquiring a suitable and powerful marionette requires planning, luck, and frequent replacements. You should have a window of three to six months.”

“Understood,” Franca replied, deciding to inform Madam Judgment that if no progress was made within two months, she would request permission to abandon the Iron and Blood Cross Order mission and relocate.

Lumian nodded in agreement.

He contemplated whether he could digest the Pyromaniac potion within three months and gather the Conspirer potion formula and main ingredients.

At that moment, Hela pointed at Loki’s mushy flesh, twisted maggots, and said, “The dead worms are excellent spiritual ingredients that can be used for many things. However, they also come with hidden issues. They have been corrupted to a certain extent, posing unknown dangers to you.”

Franca recalled her terrifying experience of almost becoming a marionette and shook her head, indicating she didn’t want them.

Lumian gazed at the countless maggots and the mushy flesh for a moment before suddenly summoning the crimson fireball floating on his shoulder. He directed it towards Loki’s remains.

Instead of exploding, the fireball ignited fiercely, casting a crimson glow.

As he watched the maggots and flesh burn, Lumian felt as though he had digested the Pyromaniac potion once more.

This came from his experience of being controlled by Loki and using the near-loss of control to ignite his own body, triggering the resonance of the Blood Emperor's aura.

This led Lumian to formulate his own acting principle for Pyromaniac: Pyromaniacs aren't arsonists. Only by daring to set themselves ablaze can they set others ablaze!

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Chapter 392 - 392 Switching Pathways

392 Switching Pathways

The digestion of the Pyromaniac potion progressed much faster than Lumian had expected. This quick reaction was likely due to the activation of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor's aura without proper protection, akin to setting a blaze in Trier. The flames burned even the Saint Vièvе Cathedral and the patriarchal cathedral of the God of Steam and Machinery Church.

"Can we now discuss the clues about transmigration?"

Franca tersely acknowledged her words and gathered her thoughts.

"Ciel had previously attempted a unique summoning ritual, which inadvertently brought forth a shadow suspected to be from my homeland, the one I share with Muggle. He even formed a contract with this entity.

"After discovering this, I had Ciel summon the shadow again to communicate with it.

"The shadow's language is remarkably similar to that of my homeland. When asked about its origin, it said, 'The Blood Son of Heaven disrupted the netherworld, and the Underworld Daoist sacrificed himself to enter the river.'"

Franca translated the last sentence into Intisian.

Hela listened attentively and then turned her gaze to Lumian.

"Could this be the apparition of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor?

"Underworld Daoist was the one who dragged Him back?"

"That's our hypothesis," Lumian replied succinctly, indicating that Franca was also aware of the Samaritan Women's Spring. There was no need for excessive secrecy.

"Underworld Daoist…" Hela murmured the term softly.

Franca continued to recount her and Lumian's theories, suspecting that the illusionary river behind the spring might connect to the original world of her and the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society members.

Hela remained silent, her dark eyes gleaming with a subtle brilliance, as though concealing a galaxy.

“That covers most of it. Once we’ve dealt with the traitors in the Research Society, I’ll share this information with everyone,” Franca said after a brief pause. She also reminded Hela, “Apart from April Fool’s, Loki’s allies might be lurking in other teams. They tend to participate in activities without playing pranks and only reveal themselves during crucial moments.”

Hela nodded slightly and replied, “I’ll discuss how to handle this with Gandalf and the others.”

The woman then turned her gaze to Lumian.

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll take you back to the surface.”

Lumian withdrew his gaze from the flames and let out a deep breath.

“I’ll take care of this.”

Rumble. Accompanied by a muted explosion and a slight tremor in the ground, the earth, carrying flesh, blood, and maggots, suddenly sank into the mire and rocks.

This way, any remaining corruption on Loki’s corpse wouldn’t be exposed to cave adventurers who might pass by later.

She assisted in carrying the corpses of the two marionettes over, contemplating whether to collect the Wraith’s teeth and nails.

These were excellent spiritual ingredients that could be used to forge Beyonder weapons.

If the Wraith had lost control and transformed into a monster, Franca wouldn’t feel any psychological burden dealing with his corpse. However, he still retained his human form.

Considering that she didn’t lack offensive weapons or poison for coating them, Franca simply harvested the powder from the translucent Wraith and absorbed its residual spirituality.

After removing the clothes bestowed by the evil god and checking for any clues, Franca tossed the two corpses into the blazing pit.

Once she had completed this task, she turned to Hela and asked with curiosity,

“Madame Hela, have you advanced to Sequence 4 and become a demigod?”

Otherwise, how could she have subdued Loki so effortlessly?

“Yes,” Hela confirmed with a nod.

Franca pondered for a moment and probed further, “You used to follow the Corpse Collector pathway, but this time, you displayed the power of the Evernight

pathway. Did you use a mystical item?”

Was it similar to using a Sealed Artifact to enable everyone to enter the Nation of the Evernight in Concealment and participate in the gathering?

The Corpse Collector pathway was also known as the Death pathway.

Hela’s voice was icy as she replied, “I’ve switched to Sequence 4 Nightwatcher of the Evernight pathway.”

“Why?” Franca was intrigued by Hela’s choice.

While she had once contemplated switching to the neighboring Hunter pathway when advancing to Sequence 4, it was mainly to restore her body to its male form. Under usual circumstances, sticking to a single pathway until the end was generally the better choice. After all, the acting acquired in the earlier Sequences were deeply ingrained in that pathway, making it easier and safer to become a Sequence 4 Beyonder of the same pathway.

Of course, if one couldn’t find the Sequence 4 potion formula and main ingredient for their pathway, they might consider switching to a neighboring pathway. It wouldn’t necessarily lead to half-madness, and they could gain a mix of unique abilities.

Franca had never seen any indication from Hela of wanting to switch pathways. When they discussed and exchanged information at the Research Society, Hela primarily focused on topics related to the Corpse Collector domain. Most of the materials and items gathered and sold were concentrated in this pathway.

Could it be that the Sequence 4 potion formula, main ingredients, or corresponding rituals of the Corpse Collector pathway proved impractical? Franca speculated, drawing on her extensive knowledge of mysticism.

Hela’s pale face softened.

She gazed into the darkness beyond the abandoned mine, her voice taking on a contemplative tone.

“If I continued along the Death pathway, the deity I believe in would eventually transform me into a crucial vessel for specific moments.”

At this point, Hela wore a rare smile and spoke with a distant look in her eyes.

Franca was initially perplexed but began to grasp Madame Hela’s reasoning for switching pathways.

Hela gave her a brief look and added, “If I can advance to Sequence 3, I should either revert to the Death pathway or switch to the Warrior pathway.

“The upper ranks of the Evernight pathway are facing a severe resource shortage.”

“Wow,” Franca couldn’t help but envision Hela wielding various Sequence abilities from the Evernight, Corpse Collector, and Warrior pathways. She found it both impressive and formidable.

She, too, felt a sense of excitement about the possibility of acquiring the abilities of a Demoness and a Hunter in the future.

Meanwhile, Lumian incinerated Loki’s mutated remains and filled the pit.

Hela promptly obscured the area in darkness.

…

When Lumian and Franca regained consciousness, they found themselves outside the abandoned mine near the entrance to Underground Trier on Rue Anarchie.

In the distance, they could hear faint movements coming from Rue des Blouses Blanches.

“Phew, this is the most dangerous situation I’ve encountered since becoming a Beyonder,” Franca said, exhaling deeply and speaking with emotion. “If Loki hadn’t used me as bait to lure you here, there’s a high chance I would have become a marionette.”

Lumian tersely acknowledged her words and remained silent.

He took a step forward and began to walk down the street.

Franca followed him and asked curiously, “Did Loki say anything when he tried to disrupt your mind with his trash talk? Although many of his words may be lies, they might contain valuable information.”

For example, the suspicion that every member of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society possessed the lingering aura of the Celestial Worthy.

Lumian remained silent for a few moments before responding.

“He recounted how they harmed Aurore, how they repeatedly disclosed her mental state and psychiatric treatment process, and how they shamelessly mocked her…”

His explanation was concise, but the simplicity of his words couldn’t mask the anger that rose in him again.

“Huh?” Franca was initially surprised but quickly grasped the gravity of the situation. “That Psychiatrist, I Know Someone?”

Lumian nodded slowly.

Franca contemplated the situation carefully, her anger growing with each passing thought.

“Dammit! How can they be so evil? I fully support you in tearing them apart, dismembering them, skinning them, and stuffing them with grass!” After several seconds of contemplation, she unleashed a curse.

Lumian remained silent, seemingly weighing the feasibility of such actions.

Franca glanced at him and hesitantly suggested, “When you faced the other April Fools’ team members earlier, you held back and didn’t kill them directly…”

Lumian chuckled.

“Why should I kill those idiots? It’s more agonizing, humiliating, and regretful for these individuals who believe they’re clever when they realize how Loki and the others manipulated them. It brings me greater satisfaction than killing them.

“In the future, whenever anyone mentions Loki, it will be akin to insulting their intelligence to their faces, and they won’t be able to escape it.”

Franca breathed a sigh of relief.

She said to Lumian, “Rue des Blouses Blanches seems quite lively. I plan to stay at Jenna’s tonight. Heh heh.

“Yes, I’ll be informing my Major Arcana card holder briefly about this matter. I’ll convey that if Loki isn’t completely eliminated within two months, I would like to request a transfer out of the market district. You, too, can apply to take charge of the Iron and Blood Cross Order’s branch elsewhere.”

“I’ll also write to my Major Arcana card holder,” Lumian assured her, indicating that he wouldn’t underestimate the potential harm Loki could cause.

Lumian had always maintained a clear distinction between personal matters and official matters. Whether dealing with the padre or investigating Loki, he had never considered seeking Madam Magician’s assistance. However, this time, his use of the Blood Emperor’s aura had caused quite a commotion, and it would be necessary to report it later.

Seeing that Lumian remained rational, Franca felt at ease. She waved farewell and stealthily made her way toward Quartier du Jardin Botanique.

Lumian averted his gaze and entered Auberge du Coq Doré, walking along the still-warm street.

He had no desire to encounter the official Beyonders who might be searching for clues on Rue des Blouses Blanches at this late hour.

As he pushed open the door to Room 207, Lumian spotted a figure inside.

It was Madam Magician, dressed in an orange waist-length dress and holding a wide-brimmed hat adorned with flowers.

“Were you waiting for me?” Lumian inquired almost instinctively.

Magician smiled.

“What else would I be doing?”

“How did you know I would come back here?” Lumian closed the door.

Magician smiled and said, “This is a revelation of fate.

“Now, tell me, why did you unleash the Blood Emperor’s aura?”

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Chapter 393 - 393 Information About Celestial Worthy

393 Information About Celestial Worthy

Lumian was taken aback.

“Did it cause a huge commotion?”

He knew that once the Blood Emperor’s aura was activated, it would undoubtedly attract the attention of nearby official Beyonders and powerful figures. It would be akin to setting Saint Viève Cathedral on fire. The commotion wouldn’t be small, but he never expected this to catch the attention of Madam Magician, who didn’t seem to be in Trier, for her to rush over.

He had intended to write a letter and report this matter.

Madam Magician nodded seriously.

“Very. It even led some people to believe that the door to Fourth Epoch Trier had opened.”

The commotion is even greater than I had imagined. As expected of Blood Emperor Alista Tudor… Lumian wasn’t vexed or surprised; instead, he calmly sat on the edge of the bed.

It had already happened, so there was no point in feeling vexed or surprised. Moreover, even if he had to do it again, he would still do it.

Lumian began recounting how he had posed as his sister to infiltrate the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and determine if there was anything amiss with the person who had sold her the Soul Summoning Spell. He continued until Loki lost control and died, but no Beyonder characteristics emerged. It was suspected that there was a way for him to revive. There was also the honorific name of an evil god that Hela and the Two of Cups had pieced together.

Magician didn’t interrupt, but the smile on her face had vanished at some point in time.

“Do I need to recite the honorific name’s four lines intermittently, or can I just say them?” Lumian finally asked.

Madam Magician’s voice was calm as she replied, “Just say it. It won’t be a problem as long as you don’t use ancient Hermes, Jotun, and other unprotected

Beyonder languages."

Lumian subconsciously surveyed the room and realized that it had grown dimmer. Although the crimson moonlight could penetrate the glass window, it seemed to be obstructed by an invisible, soundproof, and deep curtain.

He then repeated Franca's translated honorific name.

With that said, he saw Madam Magician fall silent, as if she had transformed into a statue.

"What's wrong with that?" Lumian probed.

Magician pondered for a moment and looked at him.

"You're saying that you relied on the brink of losing control from your anger to trigger the resonance of the Blood Emperor's aura and create a commotion that can break through the three layers of the thin fog's concealment?"

"That's right," Lumian replied, still feeling a lingering fear as he recalled the situation. "Normally, once my emotions exceed the limit, I would recall the cues left behind by Madam Susie. However, even the corresponding memories became intermittent and vague, preventing the cues from having the desired effect. In fact, if I hadn't held out hope when I was first controlled and instead tried to activate the Blood Emperor's aura immediately, Loki probably wouldn't have been able to truly stop me. When the control deepened, it wouldn't have worked. I could only rely on such passive reactions…"

Madam Magician wore a thoughtful expression and didn't respond.

"Is there a problem with this part of the situation?" Lumian asked bluntly.

Magician nodded slightly and said, "There's nothing wrong with this detail. It's very reasonable. It's a normal development of the situation back then. The problem is that you just obtained the Blood Emperor's aura not long ago, so it came in handy."

Lumian was taken aback for a few seconds before blurting out, "Could Amon have foreseen my encounter tonight by stuffing the Earth Blood ore into my pocket? Is His purpose to help me?"

Help that nearly got me killed?

"This might be just one of the goals, and it's not His," Madam Magician said with a soft sigh. "It's the goal of the one who's roughly equivalent to His father."

Lumian was taken aback once more.

"The one the Aurora Order believes in? The one who inherited half of the Ancient Sun God's inheritance?"

For some reason, Mr. K's maniacal laughter echoed in his mind.

Piousness is the only way out!

Madam Magician muttered to herself, "Previously, I thought I wanted to involve you more deeply in matters related to the Sauron family, the Iron and Blood Cross Order, and the Fourth Epoch Trier. Now, it seems that I'll have to include disrupting that entity's plan…"

Seeing that Lumian still didn't understand why it involved the deity believed in by the Aurora Order, Magician explained, "Do you remember when you thought accepting another Major Arcana card holder's commission was a normal and reasonable matter? You didn't need to tell me?"

"I remember," Lumian replied, not seeing any problem with that. "It's true that I made a mistake, but it has nothing to do with that person. It's a manifestation of my true thoughts."

Madam Magician chuckled.

"Coincidentally, I didn't meet Miss Justice during that time, so there was an information gap."

Lumian's eyes flickered as he caught a whiff of a conspiracy.

Madam Magician continued, "The combination of two coincidences might not be coincidental. Think about the complete honorific name of that entity."

"I can't recall," Lumian admitted. "Madam Justice made a psychological cue. I can only recall it if I pray for Mr. Fool's angelic protection."

"There's no rush. When you can recall, you'll naturally understand the source of the problem," Magician warned him simply. "You have to be vigilant once you encounter too many coincidences."

Lumian nodded solemnly.

Madam Magician consoled him,"There's no need to be too nervous, let alone reject contact with Mr. K. This time, with that entity's arrangements so obvious, He's telling us that He knows, that He is watching and listening.

"This also means that He holds no ill intentions for the time being. Otherwise, not only would you be finished, but I would also be in danger."

Lumian was burdened with numerous issues. He couldn't afford to fret at such a high level. It was pointless to fret. After all, he relied on the Tarot Club the most.

He then inquired, "Madam, which evil god does Loki and company believe in?"

Only by clarifying the evil god's domain and characteristics could he better guard against and deal with His believers in the future.

Magician fell silent for several seconds, so silent that even a Beyonder as bold as Lumian couldn't help but feel his heart race.

Eventually, she let out a sigh and remarked, "Actually, I have mentioned that evil god to you."

"Huh?" Lumian had no impression of such a thing.

Madam Magician fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "I've told you before, Mr. Fool is facing off against an ancient deity. This outcome holds the power to shape our destinies and determine whether our world can survive the impending apocalypse.

"That ancient deity is known as the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."

"It's actually Mr. Fool's enemy…" Lumian hadn't anticipated such a revelation.

Me branded by Mr. Fool… Aurore, possibly brought to this world by the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings… Loki and his associates, who are devout followers of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, sold the Soul Summoning Spell to Aurore, triggering a series of catastrophic events… Mr. Fool is in direct opposition to the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings…

A torrent of information flooded Lumian's mind, leaving him feeling like he was on the verge of unraveling a truth that was still missing crucial details.

Madam Magician pondered for a moment before continuing.

"I've also mentioned that if you address Mr. Fool using anything other than his three-lined honorific name or attempt to invoke him without following the proper ritual, I can't guarantee that he will be the one who responds. It might even lead to perilous encounters.

"Now, I can offer you a clear answer. Under those circumstances, the response you receive could very well be from the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings."

Praying to Mr. Fool in an incorrect manner might gain a response from the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings… Lumian was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information. His head felt like it was about to burst.

Then, a crucial detail caught his attention.

The title "The King of Yellow and Black" in Mr. Fool's honorific name bore a striking resemblance to Franca's translation of the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and

Earth for Blessings!

With this revelation, a chilling sensation washed over Lumian.

He hesitated for a few seconds before deciding to inquire, “What’s the connection between Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings?”

Madam Magician offered a wry smile in response.

“What I know isn’t that detailed or precise. For example, after the one the Aurora Order believes in inherited half of the Ancient Sun God’s inheritance, the Ancient Sun God was resurrected in some way.”

Lumian grasped the general idea and let out a relieved sigh.

“It seems to mirror Aurore’s association with Roche Louise Sanson.”

This facilitated his understanding.

Madam Magician seemed taken aback.

Almost instinctively, she reached out as if attempting to retrieve a drink from thin air, but she restrained herself in the end.

Lumian recounted the entire incident, a hint of pain and deep confusion in his voice.

“What could this Celestial Worthy be planning? Aurore was just a Sequence 7. Even if Roche Louise Sanson and her family are devout followers of Inevitability, they wouldn’t be able to do anything of significance…”

Madam Magician sighed once more.

“Perhaps He intends to hasten the arrival of the apocalypse and allow the evil gods beyond the barrier to invade more easily.

“In that case, in order to protect this world and us, its inhabitants, Mr. Fool might consider abandoning the confrontation and permitting the Celestial Worthy’s return intact.”

Lumian listened in a daze, a sudden thought racing through his mind.

What would happen if Mr. Fool indeed chose to stop resisting the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings?

Magician didn’t delve further into the topic.

“I can’t share more information at this moment. In short, pursuing Loki and his associates is both your personal vendetta and a shared mission of our Tarot Club. If you’re confident, take action on your own. If not, feel free to seek assistance from other Major Arcana card holders at any time to eliminate the minions of the

Celestial Worthy to the best of your ability."

With that, the woman stood up, and the room suddenly transformed into a celestial spectacle, filled with twinkling stars.

It felt as if Lumian had been transported into the vast and dazzling cosmos.

The stars revolved continuously, as if conveying a message. Madam Magician observed them for a moment before remarking, "It's true that divination doesn't reveal Loki's whereabouts or identity after his resurrection, and the others lack sufficient information.

"Once Hela has organized the relevant data, provide me with a copy."

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Chapter 394 - 394 Eye of the Storm

394 Eye of the Storm

Lumian was also waiting with anticipation for the abandoned April Fool's team members to recall useful details. He nodded and replied, "Got it."

Madam Magician fixed her gaze on him for a few moments, lost in thought.

"In the future, if I assign you a mission that seems clearly problematic, you have the option to either reject it or discuss it face-to-face with me while discreetly reaching out to other Major Arcana card holders."

"Why?" Lumian was a little confused.

By doing so, isn't Madam Magician implying that something might happen to her?

Magician chuckled self-deprecatingly.

"Because I'm a high-risk individual, susceptible to the influence of the Celestial Worthy.

"The Celestial Worthy holds the highest position in the Seer, Marauder, and Apprentice pathways. The higher the corresponding Beyonder Sequence, the more susceptible one is to His influence. Everyone carries an Oldest One within them, you see. And as a high-level Beyonder of the Apprentice pathway and a believer in The Fool, it's natural for me to occasionally be led astray, fooled, or deceived by the Celestial Worthy.

"Of course, Mr. Fool himself also stands at the pinnacle of these three pathways, which is why he opposes the Celestial Worthy. So, you need not worry about me. Most of the time, I'm under Mr. Fool's influence. There won't be anything wrong with my condition, but occasional anomalies might occur."

It's akin to praying without a ritual or invoking a name beyond those three lines; all of that can draw the Celestial Worthy's attention and invite His response, potentially planting hidden dangers… High-ranking individuals in the Seer, Marauder, and Apprentice pathways are closer to the Celestial Worthy and Mr. Fool. Even if one follows all the usual procedures, there's still a chance that something might go wrong… Lumian grasped Madam Magician's instructions before realizing that her words were revealing mysticism information that defied common sense.

Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings could simultaneously hold the pinnacle of three pathways!

Normally, reaching Sequence 0 in a pathway marked one as a true god. So what title did the individual at the peak of three pathways bear? A great existence?

For the first time, Lumian began to comprehend that Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings might surpass even true gods like the Eternal Blazing Sun.

Similarly, Amon's father, the Ancient Sun God, must belong to this echelon. After all, half of His inheritance had given rise to the one the Aurora Order believed in.

Soon, Lumian remembered Madam Magician's distinct descriptions of different deities.

Merely knowing of Their existence and invoking Their honorific names could corrupt certain deities, causing Them to undergo mutations or face peril.

Some deities could be mentioned in general terms, as long as one refrained from uttering Their honorific names beyond the three lines of Beyonder language, thus avoiding attracting Their attention.

This likely represents the division among deities… Mr. Fool and the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings occupy three neighboring and interchangeable pathways. Is this a hidden requirement for mastering a composite pathway? Lumian dared not probe further, fearing that knowing too much might lead to unintended consequences.

As for Madam Magician belonging to the Apprentice pathway, he had anticipated it. Aurore's grimoires had mentioned that Sequence 9 Apprentices in this pathway excelled at opening doors. Sequence 7s were known as Astrologers, aligning with Madam Magician's usual behavior and her occasional references to "astrology," "divination," and "fate."

"Understood," Lumian replied. He went on to explain his plan: if he failed to eliminate Loki within two months, he intended to use the Iron and Blood Cross Order's internal processes to relocate from the market district, as well as the problem about concealing the sealed mark on his body.

Magician was very understanding.

"No problem. Although you can also write to me and use yourself as bait, Loki might have the patience to wait a few more months, and I can't always be with you.

"As for the issue of the seal, if you don't actively activate it, only Beyonders of the Seer, Apprentice, and Marauder pathways who believe in the Celestial Worthy can sense it directly. This is different from the uncontrollable aura of the Celestial Worthy.

"If you need something quickly, seek angelic protection from Mr. Fool or write to me. I'll craft a charm that can safeguard secrets.

“That’s the best way to manage the Celestial Worthy’s aura on the Two of Cups for now. Fortunately, evil gods like the Mother Tree of Desire no longer pay special attention to people like them.”

Lumian breathed a sigh of relief and inquired, “Can I share the information you just mentioned about the Celestial Worthy with the Two of Cups?”

Magician declined his request, explaining, “Her Major Arcana card holder will give her a simplified explanation, but it won’t be as clear as what I just said. She doesn’t know enough either. If you reveal everything I shared with you, it could put her in danger.”

Lumian didn’t press further and watched as Madam Magician used starlight to create a dreamy door. She stepped through it and disappeared.

The room’s soundproof glass receded to its original state, and the crimson moonlight poured through the window, casting a glow on the table with the carbide lamp.

Lumian settled by the bed, his mind racing, and he couldn’t help but recall Loki’s description of his exploits against Aurore.

Taking a deep breath, he decided on his next course of action: digesting the Pyromaniac potion!

…

Quartier du Jardin Botanique, Rue Pasteur.

As dawn broke, Franca and Jenna made their way back to the market district along this street.

For the time being, Franca hadn’t figured out how to broach the subject of the dangerous situation from last night with Jenna. She used the excuse that Jenna’s brother was at home and might overhear them, so she decided to delay the conversation until tonight.

When they returned to Avenue du Marché, Jenna waved goodbye and headed towards Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

However, before she could enter the modified brick-red three-story building, she noticed graffiti in a corner, almost resembling the work of a child.

It served as a sign that the Purifiers were calling for an urgent meeting, complete with time and location details.

Jenna naturally averted her gaze and entered Théatre de l’Ancienne Cage à Pigeons.

After about fifteen minutes, in her role as the boss's lover, she left through the back door without any hindrance and arrived at a secluded alley near église Saint-Robert.

Before long, Valentine and Imre appeared.

The former didn't waste time with pleasantries and got straight to the point, asking, "Have you received any news about the terrifying aura from last night?"

Jenna was perplexed.

"What terrifying aura?"

"You didn't sense it?" Imre, who had some Southern Continent heritage, inquired with a furrowed brow. "You didn't experience any nightmares?"

Jenna shook her head.

"I wasn't in the market district last night. I went home to visit my brother."

"Is that so…" Imre examined Jenna's expression and concluded that she was telling the truth.

She genuinely had no knowledge of the terrifying aura.

The two Purifiers briefly recounted the sudden appearance of a terrifying and violent aura on Rue des Blouses Blanches the previous night, urging Jenna to be more vigilant towards anyone displaying unusual behavior lately.

Jenna agreed and asked with curiosity, "Was that aura very noticeable? Why were you able to sense it even from the cathedral?"

"It's hard to describe," Imre admitted. "If you ever have the chance to experience it, you'll understand." He himself couldn't fully grasp the extent of the influence of the terrifying aura.

After bidding farewell to the two Purifiers and returning to Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons, Jenna's thoughts turned to Franca, who had acted strangely last night.

She had cryptically mentioned danger and advised Jenna to go home for a while. Eventually, she had come to share her bed late at night, explaining that something had occurred on Rue des Blouses Blanches and that she couldn't return…

That terrifying aura had appeared on Rue des Blouses Blanches… Jenna nodded, piecing things together.

Meanwhile, Franca finished her coffee and returned to her apartment on Rue des Blouses Blanches, which had returned to its usual state.

However, upon opening the door to Apartment 601, she noticed that the invisible "spider silk" she had concealed in the crack had fallen.

This could only mean one thing—someone had entered!

In the next instant, she spotted someone sitting in her recliner.

It was Gardner Martin, a man with distinct facial features, brownish-red eyes, and a genial demeanor. A few gray strands of hair adorned his temples.

Startled, Franca exclaimed, "Why are you here?"

She was relieved that she hadn't returned with Lumian.

Gardner Martin asked, bemused, "What's your take on the aura from last night?"

"What aura?" Franca was perplexed.

Gardner Martin, dressed in a formal suit without a bow tie, examined Franca closely and explained, "A terrifying aura reeking of blood and rust."

"When did this happen?" Franca recalled and shook her head. "I was at Jenna's house last night. I wasn't in the market district."

Gardner Martin nodded slowly and smiled.

"No wonder you didn't sense it."

Apart from Ciel, Madame Hela, and me dealing with Loki, did anything else happen last night? Franca walked to the coffee table in confusion, picked up her cup, and took a sip of water.

"What happened?"

Gardner Martin stood up and approached the window, looking down at Rue des Blouses Blanches.

"Late last night, a violent and terrifying aura emerged from Building 6 on this street. It lasted nearly ten seconds."

Building 6… Building 6? Franca nearly choked on her own saliva.

Isn't that the safe house I had rented through a Loen merchant who had already left Trier?

Isn't that where I fought Loki last night?

Could Madame Hela or Loki have caused the commotion?

Or was it Ciel?

Franca quickly regained her composure before Gardner Martin turned around.

She felt as though she had missed many crucial details due to her fainting.

…

Rue Anarchie, Auberge du Coq Doré.

Lumian, who had just returned from his morning exercises, had just changed into fresh clothes and was making his way to the first-floor hall when he encountered Anthony Reid, who had been deeply engrossed in his investigation regarding General Philip's widow and child.

The Psychiatrist glanced at Lumian and inquired, "What happened in the market district last night? I've had numerous individuals attempting to buy information related to it from me."

Lumian chuckled.

"Perhaps a strange aura erupted from Rue des Blouses Blanches."

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Chapter 395 - 395 Progress on the Other Side

395 Progress on the Other Side

Anthony Reid, the middle-aged psychiatrist, observed Lumian's smile and mused, "Your performance suggests that this matter is personal to you."

Anthony Reid continued, "Your smile and actions betrayed a sense of smugness.

"And your reaction tells me this matter is deeply intertwined with you."

Could it be discerned even without mind reading? It wasn't until that moment that Lumian realized his seemingly ordinary expressions and actions might conceal hidden information in the eyes of a Psychiatrist.

Anthony Reid calmly advised, "I'm telling you directly how I've interpreted your cues. In the future, when you find yourself facing a Psychiatrist and wish to deceive them, it's best to prepare your emotions in advance and mentally rehearse your narrative as if it were genuine.

"If you'd rather not discuss the strange aura on Rue des Blouses Blanches, that's perfectly fine. I don't have the energy to gather information and trade it for money."

Lumian contemplated Anthony's words and nodded gently. He then inquired, "How's your investigation into General Philip going? Do you require our assistance?"

Anthony Reid glanced around, confirming there were no passersby in the hall at this late hour, and Madame Fels was at a considerable distance. He whispered, "General Philip's widow, child, and his closest friends during his lifetime don't seem to be a concern. They are leading normal lives.

"However, I've discovered that General Philip's widow donates a substantial sum to a charitable organization called Dreamseekers every quarter. The total donation amounts to nearly half of their apparent family assets."

Lumian pondered for a moment and asked, "Quite generous. What can you tell me about the Dreamseekers charity?"

Anthony Reid replied, "That's the subject of my next investigation. At present, I only know that their mission is to assist talented young individuals who have come to Trier to pursue their dreams but have encountered temporary hardships. They

are not affiliated with the two Churches or established by government entities. It's a private charity primarily funded by donations from high society."

Lumian smiled and issued a warning with a hint of mockery, "Be cautious when delving into the Dreamseekers. Of course, if you happen to be reckless, it won't matter. At the very least, I'm already aware that if you were to suddenly vanish or meet an untimely demise, the source of the trouble likely stems from that charitable organization."

Anthony Reid stroked his light-yellow hair.

"Don't worry, I'm timid and value my life. I duck for cover at the sound of gunfire. If I ever sense danger, I won't be too proud to seek your assistance. Besides, this is what you promised me."

Without waiting for a reply, he continued, "Guillaume Bénet's wife has been residing at 20 Rue des Terraces in the library district and hasn't attempted to relocate.

"I've bribed some ordinary folks around her. Recently, they've informed me that a mysterious man occasionally visits her late at night, raising suspicions of an affair."

Condiment Beauty Paulina… Her decision to stay put on Rue des Terraces likely means she feels more secure now. Combined with the neighborhood rumors, there's a strong likelihood that she has reestablished contact with Bouvard Pont-Péro of the Sinners organization… Lumian smiled once more.

"Instruct your informants to compile a summary of the mysterious man's visitation patterns. This way, we can catch them in the act more precisely."

It was imperative to apprehend the Sinners' liaison, Bouvard Pont-Péro!

Only then could Lumian hope to trace the Sinners organization and locate Roche Louise Sanson's family.

Initially, he had hoped to start his investigation with the Sanson family name, possibly targeting Jacques Sanson, who had once run for parliament in the market district. However, he soon realized that Sanson was a common surname in Intis, and Jacques Sanson's family connections appeared straightforward. There were no apparent issues on the surface, and there were no reports of disappearances involving his sister, daughter, or other relatives.

He couldn't shake the feeling that there were still mysteries surrounding Loki and the others who had targeted Aurore. It was impossible that the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings had directly sent a revelation instructing Loki and the others to guide Muggle into using the Soul Summoning Spell on herself, right?

Moreover, Aurore had never participated in the April Fool's team's real-life gatherings. How then could Loki determine that her original body was a follower of an evil god?

Lumian contemplated two possibilities. Either Aurore had long been tormented by Roche Louise Sanson's lingering will and sought help from I Know Someone, inadvertently revealing her secret and drawing their attention, or one of the core members of the April Fool's team had a close connection to the Sinners organization and stumbled upon the matters related to Roche Louise Sanson.

Anthony Reid nodded in approval as he observed Lumian's patience in waiting for the mysterious man who had visited Guillaume Bénet's wife to provide more clues.

…

Avenue du Marché, Salle de Bal Brise.

Just as Lumian reached the staircase, he spotted Sarkota waiting there.

"The Boss is upstairs," Sarkota whispered.

He had been a part of Baron Brignais' operation for a long time, but he had no inkling about the true identity of the elusive Boss of the Savoie Mob. By the time Ciel had taken over Salle de Bal Brise, the Boss had made two visits!

What's the Boss doing here? Lumian's mind raced as he quickly recalled the events of the past two days. A rough idea began to form.

Ascending the staircase to the second floor, he spotted Gardner Martin, impeccably dressed in formal attire, sans bow tie, leisurely savoring his coffee.

Gardner Martin put down his cup and asked with a smile, "Where did you go?"

Lumian responded with candor.

"I had a chat with Anthony Reid, the information broker. I assigned him a mission: keeping tabs on the widow of Guillaume Bénet, the enemy I just dispatched, and observing her associates.

"I suspect that Guillaume Bénet might be backed by a secret organization that worships an evil deity."

Gardner Martin chuckled and remarked, "You're not leaving any room for mercy, are you? You're even more ruthless than I thought. Yes, we can enlist the authorities' assistance to deal with these secret organizations of evil gods."

Without allowing Lumian a chance to reply, he inquired further, "Did you sense that menacing and terrifying presence last night?"

Lumian nodded honestly.

"I felt it."

I was present at the scene…

Recalling the sensation coursing through his veins when he resonated with the Blood Emperor's aura, he added,

"Back then, my blood seemed to be on fire.

"I wanted to investigate the origin of that aura, but the official Beyonders were quicker and sealed off Rue des Blouses Blanches."

"When the official Beyonders are less vigilant, pay a visit to 6 Rue des Blouses Blanches and do some digging. You might stumble upon something."

"Alright," Lumian agreed readily.

A return to the crime scene promised its own brand of intrigue.

…

Late at night, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches, Apartment 601, Franca's room.

Sitting beside the typewriter and radio transceiver, the Demoness of Pleasure perused the information before turning to Jenna, who sat by her bedside.

"The gist of the matter is that Ciel has stumbled upon a new enemy. This guy is a Sequence 5 Marionettist of the Seer pathway, a member of Bureau 8. He's sinister and powerful. Not only did he detect our surveillance, but he also traced us back and launched an ambush…"

Franca skipped over the part about the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society and recounted the entire incident.

In this narrative, Hela's identity had been that of a formidable Beyonder hired through a mysticism gathering.

Franca spread her hands and said, "I was out cold and unaware of the terrifying and violent aura that permeated the scene. When I came to, we were all underground. The Marionettist, who went by the code name Loki, was already dead. Ciel was incinerating his body, and that woman was watching."

Jenna was astounded by the capabilities and performance of a Marionettist. She tensed, feeling the summer night grow colder.

Seeing Jenna's reaction, Franca seized the moment to add, "But there's something even more chilling!"

She proceeded to recount everything she knew, sending shivers down Jenna's spine. Jenna involuntarily took a few steps closer to Franca.

“Dammit, what else have you guys been up to that I don’t know about?” Jenna mustered her courage, spewing out a few choice expletives.

“It’s not us, it’s Ciel!” Franca was about to delve into the horror when a message crackled through the radio transceiver.

The intricate analyzer automatically translated it, spitting out a piece of paper through a connected mechanical typewriter.

Franca picked it up and saw it was from 007.

“Hidden Blade, do you have any information about the terrifying aura in the market district last night?”

Franca typed out her response,

“I don’t reside in the market district. Why would I know anything about it?”

007 quickly replied, “Most of the information you provide and the favors you ask from me are related to or within the vicinity of the market district. If you haven’t set foot there in the past six months, I’ll eat my own hat!”

Franca chuckled dryly and responded, under Jenna’s watchful gaze. “I do have some knowledge about this incident.

“But I can’t spill the beans right now. You’ll get the scoop at our next gathering.”

…

As Franca conversed with 007, Lumian was resting in Room 207 of the Auberge du Coq Doré.

For the moment, he refrained from finding any acting possibilities. Despite having received treatment from Madame Hela and no longer teetering on the brink of losing control, as well as the auto-recovery at 6 a.m., there were lingering mental issues that required time and rest to slowly mend. Additionally, he needed to wait for Madame Hela to extract “confessions” from the April Fool’s team members.

Just before midnight, the pure silver skull emerged from the shadows, its teeth gripping a thick stack of papers.

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Chapter 396 - 396 Pure Evil

396 Pure Evil

Lumian expressed his gratitude and took the stack of papers. He lit the carbide lamp and quickly skimmed through the “confessions.”

After nearly an hour of reading, Lumian had a rough understanding of the overall situation.

“There aren’t many April Fool’s members, and they don’t meet often or play pranks frequently. They mainly operate in three areas: Trier, the coastal province of Gaia in the Feynapotter Kingdom, and the West Balam region of the Southern Continent.

“The core members involved in the gatherings in Trier are Loki, I Know Someone, and Mad Lady.

“In the Gaia Province, during the sea prayer rituals at Port Santa, the April Fool’s team members who pulled pranks were Bard, Ultraman, and Mad Lady. Bard and Ultraman incited local college students to march in Torres, the capital of Gaia Province…

“In the pranks that took place in the Southern Continent’s West Balam, the core members involved were Hisoka and Mad Lady.

“At a private gathering in Trier, Loki jokingly mentioned that he had inherited an ancient castle.

“At another Trier gathering, I Know Someone suddenly felt inspired and wanted to hypnotize certain psychiatrists to make them ‘conceive’ a solution to treat certain mental illnesses by destroying the frontal lobe…”

Madam Susie’s accusation of malicious treatment that would forever “calm” patients turns out to be a prank by I Know Someone… That’s true. Only someone from another world could skip previous speculations and come up with such an idea…

His sole purpose was to see if the psychiatrists of this world were as foolish, bigoted, and despicable as to create an absurd tragedy that would leave a mark on medical history… The dozens or hundreds of patients who had completely lost their “souls” would never expect their tragic encounter to stem from an inhumane prank…

Loki and I Know Someone are worse than I imagined… Lumian couldn't help but shake his head as he read the last page of the "confessions."

He believed that he had already witnessed the worst side of humanity during his tramp days. People had committed heinous acts for food, to escape trouble, to vent their emotions—they had murdered other tramps, sold companions to the mines while they were asleep, abducted children from the streets, bullied the weak, and humiliated them in various ways. Some had formed gangs and chased away other tramps every day, turning a blind eye to their suffering.

But now, Lumian realized that these evils were clearly inferior to those of Loki, I Know Someone, and the other core members of April Fool's. They were on a whole other level.

"Even demons from the Abyss would have to address them as godfathers when they see them. Compared to them, the padre can be considered a saint," Lumian muttered, setting fire to these people repeatedly in his mind.

He exhaled and extracted useful information from these "confessions" and Madame Hela's markings.

At least eight members of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society are suspected to have perished as a direct or indirect result of pranks by the April Fool's team…

I Know Someone, like Loki, participates in every private gathering in Trier, but he has never been to Feynapotter's Gaia Province or West Balam. This suggests he likely resides in Trier as well…

Similarly, Bard and Ultraman are suspected to be in Feynapotter's Gaia Province. Hisoka is located in the Southern Continent's West Balam…

Mad Lady participates in private gatherings everywhere, and these gatherings occur within a month after an agreement is made. This implies that Mad Lady has a teleportation-like ability or item…

The joke about Loki inheriting the ancient castle aligns with his dream. Perhaps I can start with investigating the appearance of the ancient castle to find Loki's whereabouts…

Bard loves to collect Emperor Roselle's diary pages and mock him in various ways. Could he have written Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles?

Based on this information, Lumian finalized his next course of investigation.

Firstly, he wanted to find the ancient castle from Loki's dream. Secondly, he aimed to delve into the medical profession, seeking clues about I Know Someone. Thirdly, he planned to wait for the next gathering to confirm whether the author of Emperor Roselle's Secret Chronicles was among the current Research Society members before pursuing the original author.

As for the others, he would consider them after dealing with these matters and gaining something more valuable.

Lumian summoned the Rabbit of Knowledge and had it copy the information before sending it to Madam Magician.

…

"What's this?" Jenna looked at the pure silver skull emerging from the darkness, a little afraid to meet the pale-white flames in its eye sockets.

Franca smiled awkwardly and said, "This is the messenger of that formidable lady. She helped us organize the accomplices' statements."

Franca snatched the thick piece of paper from the skull's mouth, not wanting Jenna to see the firsthand information.

Revealing it would expose the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society!

Jenna looked at the pure silver skull disappearing into the darkness and asked in confusion and curiosity, "What's a messenger?"

"It's like a postman in the world of mysticism. It's a postman for private use," Franca explained simply.

Jenna shifted her gaze to Franca.

"Do you have one?"

Franca fell silent.

"This can only be obtained by a specific pathway at a specific Sequence or with their help."

"Oh, you don't…" Jenna deciphered Franca's words.

Intrigued, she asked, "At which Sequence in the Demoness pathway does one need to reach before they can have a messenger?"

Franca fell silent again.

"Not even at Sequence 4 that I know of."

With that, she muttered under her breath, "You can switch to the Hunter pathway with your provocative abilities."

Jenna chuckled and thought for a moment.

"The last time I helped Ciel read about spirit world creatures, I seemed to have noticed a description of a few spirit world creatures that said they were 'suitable as

messengers.' Can we summon them and sign a messenger contract?"

"No, uh, it's not impossible." Franca suddenly realized that she could use Mr. Fool's power to summon creatures from the spirit world and ask Him to be a witness to the contract, just like Ciel's contract ability.

After a moment, Franca nodded slowly.

"I've come up with an idea. We'll try it later."

She then said to Jenna, "I'll sort out these statements. Don't stay up too late. You still have to go to Théatre de l'Ancienne Cage à Pigeons tomorrow morning."

Jenna didn't inquire further and left Franca's bedroom.

Franca let out a sigh of relief and took a telegram that had just been received.

It also came from 007.

"Hidden Blade, when are you moving out of the market district?

"Ever since you arrived here, all kinds of troubles have been happening one after another. I'm about to become a real 007. I suspect you're the walking source of disaster!"

"Pfft!" Franca spat and muttered to herself, "Is the problem me? It's Ciel!"

Ever since Lumian arrived in the market district, her life hadn't been as leisurely as before.

The incident with Loki had just subsided, and the small cracks on her skin had yet to fully heal. She had to go to Trocadéro tomorrow afternoon to interact with the participants of the Red House Café's female orgy and the woman suspected to be a member of the Demoness Sect.

…

Around 9 a.m., Lumian, having completed his morning exercise and breakfast, found himself with a rare moment of leisure.

On the Iron and Blood Cross Order's side, he awaited Poufer Sauron's next summoning. Concerning the Sinners organization, he patiently gathered information without alerting the occasional mysterious visitor. Anthony Reid would handle matters related to Hugues Artois, but his assistance wasn't needed yet. It proved challenging to discreetly tail Franca during the Bliss Society investigations as she needed to make contact with the Demoness Sect. Lumian had leads on Loki's ancient castle and I Know Someone, but lacked a clear breakthrough.

After careful consideration, Lumian decided that acting as a Pyromaniac was the best course of action. However, the market district was in a delicate state, closely

monitored by numerous high-ranking individuals. Finding a safe opportunity was crucial.

Should I take the opportunity to report to Mr. K and inquire if he has a suitable mission for me to act as a Pyromaniac… Lost in thought, he walked past the Salle de Gristmill on Rue Anarchie's other side.

The establishment was under Lumian's ownership, currently overseen by the bounty hunter Lugano Toscano and Louis of the Savoie Mob.

After a brief moment of reflection, Lumian decided to enter the Salle de Gristmill.

The dance hall was closed at that time, and every waiter greeted Lumian respectfully but kept their distance.

Lumian quickly spotted Lugano Toscano, the well-built bounty hunter with sharp features, thick eyebrows, and large eyes. He was dressed in a simple formal suit and a black top hat.

Holding a magazine, he smiled at Lumian. "Boss, what brings you here?"

Lumian didn't respond immediately. His attention was drawn to the magazine in Lugano's hand. "What magazine are you reading?"

"Basics of Medicine," Lugano replied, displaying the book.

Basics of Medicine… Lumian's eyebrows twitched. "Why are you reading such books?"

He could understand if it was the First Aid Manual.

Lugano smiled and explained, "My next Sequence is Doctor. Although the potion will directly grant me corresponding Beyonder powers, having more medical knowledge will enhance my abilities. Plus, I aim to pose as a genuine doctor to earn some extra income."

Stumbling on the acting method coincidentally… Doctor… Lumian's heart stirred as he asked, "Have you ever heard of frontal lobe removal surgery?"

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Chapter 397 - 397 Execution Ground

397 Execution Ground

“You’ve heard about this surgery too?”

After a moment of thought, he forced a smile.

“As expected of you. You’re knowledgeable and have a wide range of interests. You even know about such cutting-edge surgeries.”

“Seems like you know a lot,” Lumian brushed off Lugano’s ingratiation.

Lugano nodded quickly.

“I’ve read in several magazines that doctors believe the essence of such surgery is to destroy the patient’s brain, and it’s irreversible. In other words, while it appears to cure the patient’s madness, it leaves him with lower intelligence and eternally calm, devoid of emotional fluctuations.

“They believe that if we don’t use this surgery, there’s still a chance of recovery from the madness through other methods, but once they become stupid, there’s no hope of recovery.”

Intis still has many doctors with high academic standards who dare to speak the truth. Their professional ethics aren’t bad either… Lumian nodded inwardly.

After confirming that Lugano had a certain understanding of the medical world, he casually asked,

“Any strange medical cases recently?”

Lugano pondered for a moment and slowly shook his head.

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Just as Lumian was about to change the subject, Lugano added, “If you insist on something strange, there’s a folklore that’s been trending on a small scale recently.”

“Medical-related folklore?” Lumian discerned the underlying meaning in Lugano’s words.

Lugano, with his brown hair and eyes, replied with a smile, “Sort of.

“It’s probably because a group of Trier citizens believe that the blood shed by a death row inmate carries the last vestiges of life’s resilience. If you eat some bread dipped in it, it can treat various illnesses. This infuriated many medical columnists, who called it a retro, bloody, and foolish act. In comparison, going to the cathedral to seek protection might be more effective.”

“Why haven’t I heard of such folklore?” Lumian found the Trier citizens’ actions indescribable. They weren’t just foolish.

Lugano chuckled.

“Boss, that’s normal. I’ve never heard of it before either. It’s a folklore that only appeared in the past two to three months. Perhaps it’s brought about by some foreigners. More and more people are believing it.”

Shortly before noon, having filled his stomach, he turned onto Rue des Blouses Blanches and entered Apartment 3.

He knocked on Apartment 601’s door and tossed the Lie earring to Franca, whose flaxen-colored hair was tied up in a simple ponytail.

This companion had to interact with the Demoness Sect in the afternoon again. She had to revert to her previous appearance.

“What took you so long?” Franca precisely caught the silver earring. “Didn’t you receive the information from Madame Hela? I’ve been waiting for you to come and discuss it.”

A soft chuckle escaped Lumian’s lips.

“Why are you even more anxious than me?”

After closing the door, he sat on the sofa and recounted the key information and corresponding guesses he had extracted from the information. Franca chimed in from time to time, offering her opinions.

Towards the end, Lumian recounted the bounty hunter Lugano Toscano’s description of Trier’s medical world and the strange folklore.

Franca’s expression turned odd.

“Is there a problem?” Lumian wasn’t alarmed but delighted.

Franca confirmed succinctly, “The rumor that eating bread stained with the blood of death row inmates can treat illnesses is very similar to ancient folklore back home, but that was many years ago. Ever since education was made universal, such folklore has basically disappeared.

“In the original folklore, steamed buns dyed red by the blood of death row inmates could treat severe lung ailments, provided they were eaten while they were still

hot.”

Lumian raised his right eyebrow.

He had found the strange folklore giving him an indescribable feeling.

It felt like a prank!

This was the style of April Fool’s!

“I Know Someone came up with it?” Lumian suddenly felt a surge of excitement.

A Psychiatrist capable of hypnosis could make such folklore appear and spread without anyone knowing!

Franca nodded solemnly.

“I Know Someone is also from your sister’s and my homeland. Otherwise, your sister wouldn’t have trusted him and sought treatment for her psychological problems.

“His code name and the language he knows bear witness to this. Besides him and Black Earth, the other members of April Fool’s might not be aware of that ancient folklore.”

“Loki doesn’t know either?” Lumian asked in surprise.

“I’m not sure.” Franca frowned. “I’m not familiar with him, and he has never revealed his identity as a fellow countryman. If he hadn’t recited the four-lined honorific name in the language of your sister and me, I wouldn’t have known that he knew it. I always thought that their team’s Emperor Roselle diary entries were translated by I Know Someone and Black Earth.”

“If it’s really a folklore prank created by I Know Someone, I’ll go to the execution ground in the prison district and watch.”

The prison district, also known as Quartier du Red Hat, officially numbered 4, was one of the oldest urban districts. It boasted Intis’s most renowned prison, Saint-Maar Prison, hence the district’s name.

Near Saint-Maar Prison stood one of Trier’s busiest execution grounds—Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground.

“Be careful. Psychiatrists are more cautious than Marionettists,” Franca warned.

Although I Know Someone wasn’t a Beyonder of the Seer, Marauder, or Apprentice pathways and couldn’t discover the seal on Lumian’s body even if he believed in the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings, Lumian still felt that he couldn’t be careless. He got back the Lie earring and briefly changed his appearance. He was worried that the resurrected Loki had already communicated with I Know Someone about his and Franca’s real appearance.

Franca took back the Lie earring and asked curiously, “What was up with that terrifying aura from that day?”

Lumian chuckled.

“We’ll need to start with Madame Hela and me searching for the Samaritan Women’s Spring.”

“…” Franca was taken aback for a moment before cursing. “Dammit! How many details did you leave out?”

“It depends on when it comes up.” Lumian briefly mentioned how the Blood Emperor’s aura had corroded his flesh.

Franca had already forgotten her anger. She carefully observed Lumian’s raised right palm and finally noticed the indistinct marks that seemed to have been squeezed beyond recognition.

“Wow, you actually have the aura of a true god on you. Although it’s just an empty shell, it’s still the aura of a true god. Furthermore, it’s a true god of the same pathway.” Franca sighed enviously, wishing she could have one for herself.

She then looked at Lumian’s bandaged left hand.

“What’s on this one?”

“Nothing. It’s just to attract attention,” Lumian replied with a smile.

Franca was stunned for two seconds.

“You’re so sinister! If you advance to a Conspirer, your digestion speed will definitely be very fast!”

“I hope the outcome is as good as your blessings,” Lumian replied without modesty.

…

In the afternoon, Lumian took a public carriage to the north bank of the Srenzo River and arrived at the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground in the prison district.

One of Trier’s citizens’ hobbies was watching the execution of criminals. Although it wasn’t the weekend, there were still many people gathered here. There were even many vendors setting up stalls or traversing among them, hawking food and drinks.

Among them, there was no shortage of gorgeously dressed street girls seeking business, as well as a group of authors who had deliberately come to take a stroll.

If not for the name “Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground” written at the intersection and the gallows and beheading platform standing in the distance, Lumian would have suspected that he had come to the wrong place and entered a nearby market. It was bustling and noisy.

Stepping on the muddy ground, Lumian concealed himself in the crowd and circled the execution ground as if he were strolling through a market.

He didn’t spot anyone suspicious, but he saw a dozen or so men and women with bread in their hands crowding in front. Their clothes were old, and some of them could be considered crude.

After a while, the crowd suddenly stirred, squeezing to the sides of the road leading to the execution ground to welcome the procession from Saint-Maar Prison.

Lumian didn’t join in the bustle, but he heard cheers, whistles, and women shouting, “I’m willing to marry you.”

The latter wasn’t a proposal, but a jest about past folklore. In the classical era before Emperor Roselle, if a death row inmate received a proposal while walking from prison to the execution ground and he agreed, he would receive a change in sentence and survive. However, not all death row inmates would accept it. Some valued looks very much, while others had dignity. They all chose death to uphold their ideals.

The two most renowned cases involved a handsome death row inmate who rejected the proposal of a woman, believing her appearance to be a nightmare. On the other hand, a beautiful girl, faced with an executioner’s courtship, gave up the opportunity to save herself, believing it was an insult to love and marriage.

Lumian squeezed into the front row of onlookers and saw two death row inmates standing at the firing point.

They were relatively young, no more than 30 years old. They wore standard prison uniforms—red short shirts, yellow pants, and green hats. Their feet dragged iron balls, and their hands were tied behind their backs with iron chains.

One of the men had black hair and blue eyes, while the other had brown hair and brown eyes. They were good-looking, but their gazes were filled with hatred.

Upon seeing the execution gunmen reach their designated positions and raise their rifles, the two death row inmates shouted, “Long live freedom!”

“Return to glory!”

After shouting, the two of them glared at each other angrily and collapsed amidst the gunshots, blood gushing out.

The people holding the bread were excited, but they were stopped by the soldiers in front of them and couldn’t rush to the firing point.

Once the condition of the two death row inmates was confirmed, the soldiers left in formation. The bread-wielding citizens charged towards the blood-stained soil.

Lumian didn’t look at them. Instead, he observed his surroundings to see who was enjoying this absurd comedy.

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Chapter 398 - 398 Human Blood Bread

398 Human Blood Bread

Some of the citizens of Trier were curious and began asking around for the reason behind the commotion, while others watched with excitement. Lumian couldn't discern who was genuinely enjoying the prank's results and who was simply caught up in the fun.

This was a part of Trier's folklore. Lumian believed that even a formidable, higher-Sequence psychiatrist like Madam Susie wouldn't be able to pinpoint the source of the commotion, identify the prankster, or distinguish the intentional misguidance from the innocent bystanders.

Although Lumian had anticipated this, he couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"You Trierians…"

No wonder the April Fool's team held their private gatherings here. It was like a homecoming.

Lumian abandoned his observations and casually singled out a middle-aged man who was using rye bread to soak up the blood left behind by the death row inmates. He waited until the man made a dash for an exit of the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground before quietly following behind.

In a secluded alley devoid of barricades, Lumian took a few steps forward, blocking the path of the middle-aged man in a tattered linen shirt.

Raising his bandaged left palm, Lumian inquired, as if he were a mobster giving a condescending glance to an ordinary citizen.

"What have you got there?"

The gaunt middle-aged man with short black hair replied timidly, "It's bread stained with the blood of death row inmates."

"And what's the purpose of this?" Lumian adopted the tone of a curious monster with a touch of intrigue.

The middle-aged man's fear was palpable.

"I-It can treat illnesses."

“Who told you it could treat illnesses?” This was Lumian’s main question.

The middle-aged man answered in a daze, “I heard it from Guillaume, who lives across the street. He said that his coworker’s child got better after eating this kind of human blood bread.”

The child of a coworker’s neighbor… Lumian regarded it as nothing more than a rumor. Tracing its origin would be challenging.

He studied the middle-aged man clutching the blood-stained bread and asked with contemplation, “Is someone in your family sick too?”

“Yes.” The middle-aged man instantly looked downtrodden and filled with despair.

He glanced at the blood-stained bread in his hand, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Lumian remained silent for a moment before responding, “What did the doctor say?”

The middle-aged man lowered his head slightly, his gaze fixed on the blood bread.

“He said there’s no cure, and I don’t have the money to…”

Lumian didn’t press further. He turned silently, allowing the middle-aged man to pass through the barricade with his blood-soaked bread and continue down the secluded alley.

He moved slowly, retracing his steps back to the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground, and noticed that the “market” was still in full swing. Many citizens had taken advantage of the situation to have picnics, sing, and dance, turning it into an impromptu gathering.

Lumian took cover behind the trees on the edge of the square, sitting in the shadows, and continued to silently observe the people coming and going.

As time passed, the bustling “market” in the execution ground gradually quieted down. The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting the surroundings into darkness.

Lumian remained hidden, keeping an eye on the departing citizens and vendors. However, he didn’t identify any suspicious individuals.

With the arrival of the dark night, the Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground was deserted, bathed in the eerie light of the crimson moon. Lumian slowly rose to his feet, preparing to depart.

Suddenly, he caught sight of a dark figure leaping over the side fence and swiftly infiltrating the execution ground.

Lumian froze and pressed further into the shadows of the tree.

The slender figure, adorned with a top hat, made his way to the area where the death row inmates had met their end. He knelt down, reached out, and collected the soil stained with their blood.

Could this person also believe in the healing properties of death row inmates' blood? His actions and agility suggest he might be a Beyonder… Lumian silently watched the mysterious figure.

Before long, the tall, thin figure in the top hat straightened up, holding a mound of blood-soaked soil.

Rather than immediately leaving the Rois execution grounds, he ventured deeper, heading towards the gallows.

Under the crimson moonlight, the figure buried the blood-stained soil beneath the gallows. He seemed to scrutinize the plants growing there, as if searching for something.

…

In Trocadéro Town, inside the Red House Café with its vibrant mushroom-like roof,

Franca, sporting black hair, brown eyes, and hunting attire, placed her dinner order: beef seasoned with coarse salt, red wine, fries, Feysac omelet, quail bisque with a few slices of ham.

Earlier that afternoon, she had engaged in a lively conversation with a group of ladies and could sense the longing and desire in their eyes.

Simultaneously, she felt someone secretly observing her, prompting her to stay until nightfall.

As Franca neared the end of her dinner, a woman descended from the second floor.

It was the Demoness who had tailed Franca previously. Today, her long orange-red hair cascaded down her back, and she wore a white man's shirt, brown dungarees, and dark brown boots that accentuated her perfect figure. Her appearance was exquisite and clean, with an aura that was both pure and slightly wild.

Without hesitation, the woman, presumably a member of the Demoness Sect, walked straight toward Franca, pulled out a chair, and sat opposite her.

Franca deliberately assessed the Demoness's appearance and figure with a masculine gaze. She smiled and watched as the woman sat down, waiting for her to speak.

“Why are you here again?” the orange-red-haired Demoness inquired, studying Franca closely.

Franca smiled and replied, “Trocadéro Wine is my favorite wine. The scenery and atmosphere here are quite appealing.”

Noticing the Demoness’s disbelief, Franca added with a sly smile, “Besides, I’ve heard…”

She lowered her voice and insinuated, “There are female orgies here.”

The eyes of the Demoness with long orange-red hair flickered.

“Who told you that?”

Franca looked at the Demoness’s face and said provocatively, “Once, I encountered a nymphomaniac who tried to ambush me, but I handled him. He claimed to be a peripheral member of an organization called the Bliss Society. The core members of this organization are lesbians, and they are trying to connect with participants in the female orgies at the Red House Café, looking to recruit new members.”

Franca wasn’t sure if the Demoness Sect had any ties to the Bliss Society. After all, it wasn’t inconceivable for organizations worshiping evil gods to form alliances to some extent, similar to how Hugues Artois had numerous heretics under his influence. Therefore, she “confessed” this information to gauge the reaction of the person sitting across from her.

As she spoke, she prepared herself for any potential surprise attacks.

The Demoness with long orange-red hair’s expression shifted slightly, becoming more serious.

The hostility and wariness in her eyes diminished, but there was a clear sense of repulsion.

Oh, does she view the participants of these female gatherings as her lovers and is unwilling to let me, possibly once a man, near them? Franca couldn’t help but mimic Lumian’s tone inwardly and playfully tease.

She was reasonably certain that the other party had never heard of the Bliss Society, but she had detected some signs.

The Demoness sitting across from Franca fell into deep thought, appearing to consider a potential issue.

After more than ten seconds, she unconsciously brushed back her long orange-red hair and asked cautiously, “Are you here to investigate the Bliss Society, or are you interested in joining the orgy?”

Franca's laugh drew astonished looks from the surrounding customers, who were clearly taken aback by her stunning expression.

"Both," Franca replied, meeting the orange-red eyes of the Demoness. "But if I had to choose, I'd prefer attending the orgy. How can people like us resist such a tempting party? Wouldn't you agree?"

In this way, Franca subtly indicated that she had deduced that the other person was also a Demoness and likely a former male Assassin.

She also hinted at her own history as a man to deter any sudden attacks.

The Demoness, now dressed as a man, seemed to resist this notion but remained silent, clearly captivated by Franca's presence and aura.

Leaning forward, Franca asked in a more masculine tone, "What should I call you?"

The Demoness hesitated briefly before responding somberly, "I'm Browns Sauron. And you?"

Sauron… Another member of the Sauron family? Franca suddenly recalled that Lumian's recent mission under the Iron and Blood Cross Order involved interactions with members of the Sauron family.

She didn't conceal her true name and smiled. "Franca Roland."

Browns Sauron let out a silent sigh and continued, "Our party places great importance on the privacy and safety of all members. We can't allow problematic individuals to join. If you're truly interested, you'll need to undergo an audit."

Franca didn't mind at all. She toyed with the buttons on her shirt and inquired with a grin,

"So, where should we start this audit?"

…

Prison district, Rois Comprehensive Execution Ground.

Under the crimson moonlight, the tall, slender figure in the top hat carefully unearthed a few handfuls of weeds from the ground beneath the gallows.

The roots of these weeds emitted an eerie, blood-red glow, appearing especially otherworldly in the moon's dim light.

This tall, thin figure had a prominent nose bridge, fair skin, and impeccably groomed medium-length black hair. His eyes were a striking shade of red, and he possessed a certain androgynous allure.

Clad in a white shirt, a vibrant red bow tie, and a sleek black suit, he gazed with fascination at the peculiar weeds in his hand. He was on the verge of rising to leave the execution grounds.

However, at that very moment, a curious male voice broke the silence.

“What are you digging?”

The lanky figure, who had been crouched beneath the gallows, looked up in astonishment. To his surprise, he realized that, at some unnoticeable point in time, a figure had materialized before him, peering down with a penetrating gaze.

This new arrival had blond hair and eyes as blue as serene lakes. He wore a simple white shirt and a black vest, giving him a youthful and refreshing appearance.

How did he manage to approach me without detection? I didn’t pick up on any scent or movement! The lanky figure’s heart raced with alarm and trepidation.

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Chapter 399 - 399 Mandrake

399 Mandrake

The lanky figure, though startled, sprang into action.

Rather than reaching out with his right hand, which was gripping the strange weeds, he extended his nails, etched with mystical symbols and patterns, appearing hard and razor-sharp.

Darkness surrounding Lumian seemed to awaken, converging into pitch-black chains that aimed to ensnare him in place.

Lumian's gaze remained resolute as he observed the rapidly approaching figure. He emitted a soft harrumph.

Two beams of brilliant white light shot forth from his nostrils, striking the target before he could evade in time.

The tall, slender figure suddenly crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

The illusory chains, formed from darkness, disintegrated into nothingness.

Lumian, donning a different visage, grinned and shook his head. "You actually opted for an attack rather than fleeing."

Utilizing spirit world traversal, he teleported to close the distance with his target discreetly, preventing him from sensing the impending danger. When they were within mere meters of each other, escape or counterattack became impossible. At worst, both parties would sustain injuries. Hence, Lumian still had time for a "greeting." If the other party cooperated and answered civilly, there might be no need for a confrontation.

It was akin to a phrase frequently espoused by the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society:

Encouraging compliance through good morals!

Lumian carefully observed for a few moments and confirmed that the tall, thin figure had indeed fainted.

He bent down to examine the peculiar blood-red rooted weeds. Apart from their extraordinary spiritual properties, they seemed rather ordinary.

After some contemplation, Lumian hoisted the unconscious figure and shook him vigorously.

As the target began to stir, Lumian released his grip and stepped back.

Based on the previous skirmish, Lumian suspected that the other party was a Mid-Sequence Beyonder from the Apothecary pathway, specifically Sequence 7, known as Vampire. This meant that any human who consumed the corresponding potion to advance would eventually undergo a transformation into another species.

Aurore possessed substantial knowledge about Vampires' characteristics and abilities, as the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society included two individuals known as Sanguines, one of whom bore the code name "Headmaster."

Hence, Lumian deduced the target's identity based on his swift reflexes, formidable nails, and the dark shackles-like spells he wielded.

Since he wasn't a Psychiatrist and didn't possess any similar items, they weren't truly enemies. The best course of action was to engage in a friendly and cooperative conversation.

As soon as the lanky figure regained consciousness, he sprang to his feet and scanned his surroundings with a wary gaze. His eyes fell upon a blond youth standing by the gallows, dressed in a crisp outfit and wearing a friendly smile.

The other party had clearly demonstrated the ability to subdue him effortlessly, with the power to end his life or sell him at any moment. However, instead of harm, he had chosen to awaken him!

The lanky figure recalled the other party's sudden appearance and the peculiar white beams. He couldn't help but feel that even if the barons or even viscounts from his family were to confront him, the outcome wouldn't be so swift and one-sided.

Coupled with his ignorance of the two white beams' nature and the corresponding pathway, he suspected that the individual before him had surpassed his expectations in terms of Sequence.

"What do you want?" the lanky figure inquired in a deep voice.

Lumian remained composed, ready to employ the Spell of Harrumph if necessary.

"Are you a Vampire?"

"Sanguine," the lanky figure emphasized.

Lumian cast his eyes skyward at the crimson moon and inquired with a smile, "Which family?"

Though he possessed no knowledge of the numerous Vampire families or the renowned last names, it didn't prevent him from assuming the role of an ancient being, wise and well-traveled.

Sensing the fear in the lanky figure's demeanor, Lumian seized the opportunity to play this role, drawing inspiration from figures like the ancient monster Amon, who had lived for eons.

"I hail from the Bruch family," the tall, slender figure declared with pride. "My name is La Nou Bruch."

What kind of family is this? I've never heard of them… Lumian nodded slightly and said, "Ah, the Bruch family."

He glanced at the strange weed in La Nou's hand. "What is this?"

"It's Mandrake," La Nou responded truthfully, believing that such a potent Beyonder wouldn't have much interest in a plant primarily used for spiritual purposes.

You mustn't merely answer my questions one by one. Be proactive and provide context and your reasons for being here. How can I maintain my image like this? Lumian chided him internally as he thought rapidly.

"Did you come specifically to retrieve it because this herb holds unique significance for you?"

La Nou hesitated for a moment before succumbing to his fear.

"Yes, the lotion made from it can help me withstand the spirituality surge during the full moon."

Spirituality surge… Lumian recalled some details from Aurore's grimoires: The Headmaster of the Academy team had sought a solution to the spirituality surge during the full moon within the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society, but had found none.

According to Sanguine accounts, after the awakening of the Ancestor of the ancient species a few years ago and Her reclamation of authority from the Evernight Goddess, all Sanguines had become unstable during the full moon.

This wasn't the madness that afflicted the Mutants, but a form of sublimation. Nevertheless, the sudden surge in spirituality, akin to a rising tide, placed a substantial burden on the Vampires' bodies. Some experienced hallucinations or unnecessary danger due to their heightened spiritual perception during this period.

Lumian regarded La Nou with interest and asked, "Mandrake can suppress the spirituality surge during the full moon?"

"The few Sanguines I've encountered seem to be unaware of this."

The entire Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society was unaware!

“I believe I may be the first to have made this discovery. Mandrake is a plant that thrives beneath the corpses of hanged individuals. It appears to draw power from some sort of earthbound divine influence.”

Spiritual plants associated with the earth domain? Lumian inquired thoughtfully, “How did you stumble upon this revelation?”

Observing that such a formidable Beyonder was ignorant of the origins and applications of Mandrake, La Nou’s smile broadened.

“At first, there were rumors circulating about the plants that grew beneath the bodies of the hanged being able to treat various ailments. Given that every Sanguine is an Apothecary, I couldn’t entirely dismiss these rumors. So, I decided to give it a shot. I crafted a Mandrake lotion and found that it remarkably suppressed spirituality fluctuations.”

Rumor… Rumors once again… Lumian suppressed his frown.

“Do you happen to know where these rumors originated?”

“I’m afraid not,” La Nou replied with a shake of his head. “In Trier, rumors abound. For example, in recent months, I was concerned that the reckless harvesting of Mandrake by uninformed citizens might disrupt its growth. However, new rumors have surfaced, with people now chasing after blood-soaked soil from death row inmates.”

“It’s indeed a challenge to trace the origins of rumors in Trier,” Lumian remarked, a touch of resignation in his voice.

“Why did you bring soil stained with the blood of a death row inmate to the gallows?”

La Nou proudly displayed his findings.

“I’ve discovered that Mandrake flourishes beneath the bodies of hanged individuals. While it’s most effective, hanging people isn’t a common occurrence. However, by using the blood of other death row inmates to nourish it, Mandrake can still grow. Although it’s not as potent, it gets the job done.”

Lumian nodded thoughtfully, considering another aspect of the issue.

“Who initially gave the Mandrake its name? Wasn’t it merely a rumor in the beginning?”

When it came to topics within his apparent “profession,” La Nou spoke confidently.

“This plant has borne its name for quite some time, though no one had discovered its medicinal value until now. It was primarily utilized as a spiritual ingredient and as a component in certain spells…”

At this juncture, La Nou suddenly fell into a momentary stupor.

“Why haven’t my ancestors, the illustrious Apothecaries, attempted to concoct lotions with Mandrake? They aren’t confined to traditional knowledge; they explore ingredients based on principles and develop new lotions…”

“Perhaps they did try, but there was no spiritual surge in those times?”

Could it be that Mandrake possessed some mystical power triggered by the spirituality surge accompanying the full moon? Lumian, not being an Apothecary or a Mysticologist, couldn’t arrive at a conclusive answer. All he could do was speculate based on La Nou’s musings.

He changed the subject.

“Why did you refrain from reporting the Mandrake’s utility to your elders? It could hold great significance for the entire Sanguine community.”

La Nou stammered, “There are still some issues with the lotions I’ve crafted. I’m uncertain if the toxicity of Mandrake can be entirely neutralized. I plan to verify this before informing the higher-ups. Only then can I have a clear chance at ascending to the rank of baron.”

“What issues have you encountered?” Lumian queried, part-curious and partly assisting the Headmaster of the Curly-Haired Baboons Research Society.

La Nou adjusted his long, black hair and expressed his concerns with a mix of confusion and apprehension.

“Whenever I consume the various Mandrake-based lotions, it’s akin to ingesting poisonous mushrooms. I witness an abundance of flowers blooming on the ground, with countless tiny figures dancing amidst them. I find myself covered in mushrooms.

“The illusions vary somewhat each time, but recurring elements persist.”

Could it be that your preemptive entry into the illusion mitigates the adverse effects of your spirituality surge state? Is that why you believe Mandrake can suppress this phenomenon? Lumian silently pondered.

Without further ado, he activated his spirit world traversal ability and vanished from La Nou’s view.

A Sequence 5 Traveler or an item of similar nature? La Nou heaved a sigh of relief, hazarding a rough guess as to why the other party could appear beside him before he could react.

Coupled with the strange white beams, such a figure was undoubtedly formidable below the demigod level.

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Chapter 400 - 400 Transferring Burdens

400 Transferring Burdens

The street lamps outside the window had already lit up. Franca gazed at Browns Sauron and spoke, “I’ve already mentioned my name. I reside in the market district and hold a significant position within the Savoie Mob. That’s all I can reveal. You’re free to investigate me as you wish. In any case, I have two objectives. Firstly, I intend to probe into the Bliss Society and eliminate any hidden threats. Secondly, I plan to take the opportunity to gain insight into the female gathering.”

Her strategy for the day involved connecting with people genuinely—a tactic she had devised with Lumian. If the Demoness at the Red House Café approached her, she would “confess” her intentions and assess if the other party had any ties to the Bliss Society.

Franca had even discussed specific details with Anthony Reid, a Psychiatrist, to prevent herself from reacting excessively. If that happened, it could do more harm than good.

According to Anthony Reid’s suggestion, she was “candid,” but not completely forthcoming. Revealing that she was once a man, had transformed into a Demoness of Pleasure, and was infiltrating the Savoie Mob to join the Iron and Blood Cross Order and eventually return to her original gender would not only fail to gain trust but also raise suspicions of ulterior motives due to her excessive honesty.

Thus, she only disclosed her identity and primary motives on the surface, leaving the rest hidden in the details, allowing the other party to uncover and investigate on their own.

Information gathered through effort was much more credible than mere words!

Browns Sauron fixed his gaze on Franca’s eyes and remarked, “With the strength you’ve demonstrated, why limit yourself to being a mob leader?”

“For something of great importance, I believe you would have done the same,” Franca replied cryptically, hinting that she had also discerned the other party’s path, approximate Sequence, and original circumstances.

With that, she raised her hand to touch the silver-white earring fastened to her right earlobe and added with a grin, “I forgot to mention that this isn’t my true

appearance. My disguise is quite effective. Otherwise, why did you lose track of me the last time?"

Browns glanced at the silver earring, nodding in comprehension.

Instead of delving deeper into Franca's identity, the conversation shifted toward the topic of the Bliss Society.

Franca could discern that the Demoness placed significant importance on the Red House Café's female orgies and was cautious about any organizations or individuals with hidden agendas.

Are you telling me that you genuinely form romantic connections with some of the participants in these orgies and have developed feelings for them? If this continues, you're bound to encounter trouble sooner or later. It's perfectly natural to have emotions, but seeking them in such gatherings is a sign of a narrow perspective… Can't you completely separate the spiritual from the physical? When there's too much spiritual connection, the desire for physical intimacy grows. Conversely, with too much physical intimacy, it's inevitable for souls to draw closer… As an observer, Franca offered her critique of Browns Sauron's situation, drawing from the knowledge and experiences of two lifetimes that had led to her philosophical reflections.

This insight allowed her to grasp her first principle as a Demoness of Pleasure to some extent.

She didn't withhold any information. On the one hand, she suspected that the Demoness Sect had fostered such an "innocent" and emotionally driven Demoness because they had their sights set on the Sauron family. On the other hand, she recounted the general activities and abilities of the Bliss Society.

Upon hearing the name "Sex Addict" and its corresponding behavior, Browns Sauron's expression grew serious and cautious.

Franca knew when to conclude the conversation. She finished her after-dinner liqueur, rose gracefully, put on her blue bonnet, and departed from the Red House Café.

As she entered the rental carriage and returned to the market district, her mind raced, analyzing potential vulnerabilities.

I need to persuade Jenna to move out. But having her stay in my apartment might reveal my true gender. I must remind her not to display her Assassin and Instigator abilities for the time being…

The issue with Ciel is that if Browns Sauron and Poufer Sauron frequently interact, they might discover that the affluent merchant's generous scion is, in reality, the leader of the market district's mob, exposing the Iron and Blood Cross Order's hidden agenda. Yes, Browns is affiliated with the Demoness Sect and doesn't share the same interests as the Sauron family. There is a significant likelihood that she would conceal this fact and exploit it…

“…”

Rue du Rossignol, market district.

Lumian “teleported” back to his safe house.

While waiting for Franca to return Lie to him and allow him to revert to his original appearance, he contemplated the rumors circulating about the human blood bread.

It would have been manageable if I had discovered it from the outset, but now it’s already widely believed. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of people have bought into it. Tracing it back to the source will be extremely challenging. Moreover, even if I locate the origin, the person responsible may be filled with false information and unable to identify their source… Finding a skilled Psychiatrist who can hypnotize people is quite a task…

The Mandrake rumor La Nou Bruch had heard appears suspicious…

After careful consideration, Lumian decided not to dwell on it. He would report it to Madam Magician and explore the possibility of hiring someone like Madam Susie or even a high-ranking Psychiatrist such as Madam Justice to investigate the source of the rumors.

They were experts in similar operations and possessed all the abilities of “I Know Someone,” and even more!

The matter concerning the Celestial Worthy of Heaven and Earth for Blessings was a shared mission of the Tarot Club.

Likewise, Lumian intended to burden the Major Arcana card holders with the other clue. Given his abilities, it was practically impossible for him to investigate it further.

He believed that since Loki was operating within Bureau 8, there was a chance he had either subtly influenced some of his colleagues or been discovered by them. All these were potential leads.

However, based on his experiences dealing with a Marionettist, Lumian recalled the events at the Alone Bar and the puppet show in the basement. It wasn’t as murky as he had initially thought. It exuded an aura of malevolence, obscurity, and terror, and he could distinctly perceive the tangible danger concealed within the various details.

He suspected that most of the spectators at the marionette theater were, in fact, marionettes themselves, fitting the bar’s name: Alone!

It seemed that there was only one living person amidst the marionettes!

Of course, this was somewhat exaggerated. It was evident that a few Bureau 8 members were working as bartenders and waitstaff at the Alone Bar, including Loki and Leah.

Nevertheless, Beyonders capable of manipulating an entire theater filled with marionettes were far more powerful than Loki. They likely exceeded Sequence 5 and might even be demigods of the Seer pathway.

Regardless of Lumian's confidence, he didn't believe he could uncover any clues in a bar protected by a demigod. He didn't dare to attempt it.

Only the Major Arcana card holders of the Tarot Club could conduct a thorough investigation in that direction!

Without hesitation, Lumian unfolded a letter and began reporting his findings to Madam Magician.

As the "doll" messenger was summoned, it cast a glance at Lumian and remarked, "Do you enjoy dressing up?"

Is that because I'm wearing a new face? Lumian smiled and replied, "It's a necessity in certain situations. Disguises help ensure that one remains unrecognized when carrying out certain tasks."

The messenger nodded slowly.

"No wonder you can't tell I'm different every day."

Lumian gazed at the light-golden attire of the "doll" messenger, unsure whether to offer a truthful response or a white lie.

Observing Lumian's silence, the messenger snatched the letter and stated sharply, "My hair is smoother, my skin is more elastic, and my dress is new…"

With those words, the messenger's voice gradually faded away as it dissolved into the candlelight.

Lumian let out a sigh and muttered to himself, Perhaps the more familiar I become with someone, the less I notice their subtle changes…

It was akin to Franca, who appeared so relaxed around him that she didn't feel the need to rack her brains on many things.

If one had to rack their brains and be on edge when interacting with others, their mental state would inevitably deteriorate over time.

Seeing that it was time, Lumian left Rue du Rossignol and arrived at Apartment 601, 3 Rue des Blouses Blanches. He knocked on the door, and Jenna opened it, looking surprised.

“Who might you be?”

Lumian scoffed. “Can’t you still not tell from my gait?”

“Dammit, your aura, which makes others want to beat you up, will make your disguise useless!” Jenna knew that Lumian possessed a mystical item capable of altering his appearance.

Once Lumian entered the living room, he glanced around.

“Where’s Franca?”

“She hasn’t returned from her visit to the Red House Café,” Jenna replied, already aware that Franca had intentions of engaging with a member of the Demoness Sect. She had also heard her companion mention the secret organization’s animosity towards female Assassins.

Lumian stroked Franca’s Mirror Substitution in his arms and settled into an armchair when he saw that nothing was amiss.

This was Jenna’s usual spot.

Jenna rolled her eyes at him and perched on the armrest of a nearby chair. She asked thoughtfully,

“Why do you have so many enemies? How many of them are there?”

Lumian had briefly recounted the Cordu disaster but had omitted much of his past. He replied simply, “The Soul Summoning Spell that caused my sister’s problem was acquired from an organization called April Fool’s. They intentionally sold it to my sister. My current objective is to locate their key members and execute them one by one.”

Jenna pursed her lips, refraining from delving into the specifics to avoid upsetting Lumian.

“How can I assist?” she inquired earnestly.

Lumian pondered for a moment and replied, “Your dedication to becoming a Witch is the greatest assistance you can provide me.”

Not only were the core members of April Fool’s formidable, but they also had no boundaries. Jenna could only participate in the pursuit of these individuals after becoming a Witch and gaining the ability to create a Mirror Substitution of herself.

Internally seething with anger, Jenna refrained from voicing her frustration. She quietly observed Lumian for a few seconds and remarked, “I sense that you’re more exhausted than before…”

Lumian subconsciously smiled.

“But I’m also more motivated.”

“But isn’t this too intense? Franca mentioned that a constantly tense string is prone to snapping. The best approach is to alternate between tension and relaxation,” Jenna expressed her concern.

Lumian gave a self-deprecating smile.

“But they won’t allow me to relax. They’re determined to kill me themselves.”

Noticing Jenna’s confusion, he added with a cold expression, “They haven’t reported me to the authorities despite knowing that I’m a wanted criminal. It’s clear they want me to remain in the market district until they finalize their plan and make all the necessary preparations.”

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